

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

STEFAN ZWEIG

Translated by Eden and Cedar Paul

HALLAM EDITION



CASSELL
and Company Limited
LONDON TORONTO MELBOURNE
SYDNEY WELLINGTON

PEOPLE'S BOOK HOUSE,
3-2-829/1, Nizam Shahi Road,
HYDERABAD, INDIA

First published in the Hallam Edition 1949

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON, LTD., THE
TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON
F.440

CONTENTS

<i>page</i>	
AMOK	I
THE BURNING SECRET	61
MOONBEAM ALLEY	135
TRANSFIGURATION	157
FEAR	219
THE FOWLER SNARED	267
THE GOVERNESS	279

AMOK

IN March, 1912, when a big mail-boat was unloading at Naples, there was an accident about which extremely inaccurate reports appeared in the newspapers. I myself saw nothing of the affair, for (in common with many of the passengers), wishing to escape the noise and discomfort of coaling, I had gone to spend the evening ashore. As it happens, however, I am in a position to know what really occurred, and to explain the cause. So many years have now elapsed since the incidents about to be related, that there is no reason why I should not break the silence I have hitherto maintained.

I had been travelling in the Federated Malay States. Recalled home by cable on urgent private affairs, I joined the *Wotan* at Singapore, and had to put up with very poor accommodation. My cabin was a hold of a place squeezed into a corner close to the engine-room, small, hot, and dark. The fusty, stagnant air reeked of oil. I had to keep the electric fan running, with the result that a fetid draught crawled over my face reminding me of the fluttering of a crazy bat. From beneath came the persistent rattle and groans of the engines, which sounded like a coal-porter tramping and wheezing as he climbed an unending flight of iron stairs; from above came the no less persistent tread of feet upon the promenade deck. As soon as I had had my cabin baggage properly stowed away, I fled from the place to the upper deck, where with delight I inhaled deep breaths of the balmy south wind.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

But on this crowded ship the promenade deck, too, was full of bustle and disquiet. It was thronged with passengers, nervously irritable in their enforced idleness and unavoidable proximity, chattering without pause as they prowled to and fro. The light laughter of the women who reclined in deck-chairs, the twists and turns of those who were taking a constitutional on the encumbered deck, the general hubbub, were uncongenial. In Malaya, and before that in Burma and Siam, I had been visiting an unfamiliar world. My mind was filled with new impressions, with lively images which chased one another in rapid succession. I wanted to contemplate them at leisure, to sort and arrange them, to digest and assimilate; but in this noisy boulevard, humming with life of a very different kind, there was no chance of finding the necessary repose. If I tried to read, the lines in the printed page ran together before my tired eyes when the shadows of the passers-by flickered over the white page. I could never be alone with myself and my thoughts in this thickly-peopled alley.

For three days I did my utmost to possess my soul in patience, resigned to my fellow-passengers, staring at the sea. The sea was always the same, blue and void, except that at nightfall for a brief space it became resplendent with a play of varied colours. As for the people, I had grown sick of their faces before the three days were up. I knew every detail of them all. I was surfeited with them, and equally surfeited with the giggling of the women and with the windy argumentativeness of some Dutch officers coming home on leave. I took refuge in the saloon; though from this haven, too, I was speedily driven away because a group of English girls from Shanghai spent their time between meals hammering out waltzes on the piano. There was nothing for it but my cabin. I turned in after luncheon, having drugged myself with a couple of bottles of beer, resolved to escape

AMOK

dinner and the dance that was to follow, hoping to sleep the clock round and more, and thus to spend the better part of a day in oblivion.

When I awoke it was dark, and stuffier than ever in the little coffin. I had switched off the fan, and was dripping with sweat. I felt heavy after my prolonged slumber, and some minutes slipped by before I fully realized where I was. It must certainly be past midnight, for there was no music to be heard, and the tramp-tramp of feet overhead had ceased. The only sound was that of the machinery, the beating heart of the leviathan who wheezed and groaned as he bore his living freight onward through the darkness.

I groped my way to the deck, where there was not a soul to be seen. Looking first at the smoking funnels and the ghostlike spars, I then turned my eyes upward and saw that the sky was clear; dark velvet, sprinkled with stars. It looked as if a curtain had been drawn across a vast source of light, and as if the stars were tiny rents in the curtain, through which that indescribable radiance poured. Never had I seen such a sky.

The night was refreshingly cool, as so often at this hour on a moving ship even at the Equator. I breathed the fragrant air, charged with the aroma of distant isles. For the first time since I had come on board I was seized with a longing to dream, conjoined with another desire, more sensuous, to surrender my body—womanlike—to the night's soft embrace. I wanted to lie down somewhere and gaze at the white hieroglyphs in the starry expanse. But the long chairs were all stacked and inaccessible. Nowhere on the empty deck was there a place for a dreamer to rest.

I made for the forecastle, stumbling over ropes and past iron windlasses to the bow, where I leaned over the rail watching the stem as it rose and fell, rhythmically, cutting its way through the phosphorescent waters. Did I

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

stand there for an hour, or only for a few minutes? Who can tell. Rocked in that giant cradle, I took no note of the passing of time. All I was conscious of was a gentle lassitude, which was wellnigh voluptuous. I wanted to sleep, to dream; yet I was loath to quit this wizard's world, to return to my 'tween-decks coffin. Moving a pace or two, I felt with one foot a coil of rope. I sat down, and, closing my eyes, abandoned myself to the drowsy intoxication of the night. Soon the frontiers of consciousness became obscured; I was not sure whether the sound I heard was that of my own breathing or that of the mechanical heart of the ship; I gave myself up more and more completely, more and more passively, to the environing charm of this midnight world.

A dry cough near at hand recalled me to my senses with a start. Opening my eyes that were now attuned to the darkness, I saw close beside me the faint gleam of a pair of spectacles, and a few inches below this a fitful glow which obviously came from a pipe. Before I sat down I had been intent on the stars and the sea, and had thus overlooked this neighbour, who must have been sitting here motionless all the while. Still a little hazy as to my whereabouts, but feeling as if somehow I was an intruder, I murmured apologetically in my native German: "Excuse me!" The answer came promptly, "Not at all!" in the same language, and with an unmistakable German intonation.

It was strange and eerie, this darkling juxtaposition to an unseen and unknown person. I had the sensation that he was staring vainly at me just as I was staring vainly at him. Neither of us could see more than a dim silhouette, black against a dusky background. I could just hear his breathing and the faint gurgle of his pipe.

The silence became unbearable. I should have liked to get up and go away, but was restrained by the convic-

tion that to do this without a word would be unpardonably rude. In my embarrassment I took out a cigarette and struck a match. For a second or two there was light, and we could see one another. What I saw was the face of a stranger, a man I had never yet seen in the dining-saloon or on the promenade deck; a face which (was it only because the lineaments were caricatured in that momentary illumination?) seemed extraordinarily sinister and suggestive of a hobgoblin. Before I had been able to note details accurately, the darkness closed in again, so that once more all that was visible was the fitful glow from the pipe, and above it the occasional glint of the glasses. Neither of us spoke. The silence was sultry and oppressive, like tropical heat.

At length I could bear it no longer. Standing up, I said a civil "Good night."

"Good night!" came the answer, in a harsh and raucous voice.

As I stumbled aft amid the encumbrances on the fore-deck I heard footsteps behind me, hasty and uncertain. My neighbour on the coil of rope was following me with unsteady gait. He did not come quite close, but through the darkness I could sense his anxiety and uneasiness.

He was speaking hurriedly.

"You'll forgive me if I ask you a favour. I . . . I," he hesitated, "I . . . I have private, extremely private reasons for keeping to myself on board . . . In mourning . . . That's why I made no acquaintances during the voyage. You expected, of course . . . What I want is . . . I mean, I should be very greatly obliged if you would refrain from telling anyone that you have seen me here. It is, let me repeat, strictly private grounds that prevent my joining in the life of the ship, and it would be most distressing to me were you to let fall a word about my frequenting this forecastle alone at night. I . . ."

He paused, and I was prompt in assuring him that his

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

wishes should be respected. I was but a casual traveller, I said, and had no friends on board. We shook hands. I went back to my cabin to sleep out the night. But my slumbers were uneasy, for I had troubrous dreams.

I kept my promise to say nothing to anyone about my strange encounter though the temptation to indiscretion was considerable. On a sea voyage the veriest trifle is an event—a sail on the horizon, a shoal of porpoises, a new flirtation, a practical joke. Besides, I was full of curiosity about this remarkable fellow-passenger. I scanned the list of bookings in search of a name which might fit him; and I looked at this person and that, wondering if they knew anything about him. All day I suffered from nervous impatience, waiting for nightfall, when I hoped I might meet him again. Psychological enigmas have invariably fascinated me. An encounter with an inscrutable character makes me thrill with longing to pluck the heart out of the mystery, the urge of this desire being hardly less vehement than that of a man's desire to possess a woman. The day seemed insufferably long. I went to bed early, certain that an internal alarm would awaken me in the small hours.

Thus it was. I awoke at about the same time as on the previous night. Looking at my watch, whose figures and hands stood out luminous from the dial, I saw that the hour had just gone two. Quickly I made for the deck.

In the tropics the weather is less changeable than in our northern climes. The night was as before: dark, clear and lit with brilliant stars. But in myself there was a difference. I no longer felt dreamy and easeful, was no longer agreeably lulled by the gentle swaying of the ship. An intangible something confused and disturbed me, drew me irresistibly to the fore-deck. I wanted to know whether the mysterious stranger would again be sitting there, solitary, on the coil of rope. Reluctant and yet eager, I yielded to the impulse. As I neared the place I

caught sight of what looked like a red and glowing eye—his pipe. He was there!

Involuntarily I stopped short, and was about to retreat, when the dark figure rose, took two steps forward, and, coming close to me, said in an apologetic and lifeless voice:

“Sorry! I’m sure you were coming back to your old place, and it seems to me that you were about to turn away because you saw me. Won’t you sit down? I’m just off.”

I hastened to rejoin that I was only on the point of withdrawing because I was afraid of disturbing him, and that I hoped he would stay.

“You won’t disturb me!” he said with some bitterness. “Far from it; I am glad not to be alone once in a while. For days upon days I have hardly spoken to a soul; years, it seems; and I find it almost more than I can bear to have to bottle everything up in myself. I can’t sit in the cabin any longer, the place is like a prison-cell; and yet I can’t stand the passengers either, for they chatter and laugh all day. Their perpetual frivolling drives me frantic. The silly noise they make finds its way into my cabin, so that I have to stop my ears. Of course, they don’t know I can hear them, or how they exasperate me. Not that they’d care if they did, for they’re only a pack of foreigners.”

He suddenly pulled himself up, saying: “But I know I must be boring you. I didn’t mean to be so loquacious.”

He bowed, and moved to depart, but I pressed him to stay.

“You are not boring me in the least. Far from it, for I, too, am glad to have a quiet talk up here under the stars. Won’t you have a cigarette?”

As he lighted it, I again got a glimpse of his face, the face which was now that of an acquaintance. In the momentary glare, before he threw away the match, he

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

looked earnestly, searchingly at me, appealingly it almost seemed, as his spectacled eyes fixed themselves on mine.

I felt a thrill akin to horror. This man, so it seemed to me, had a tale to tell, was on fire to tell it, but some inward hindrance held him back. Only by silence, a silence that invited confidence, could I help him to throw off his restraint.

We sat down on the coil of rope, half facing one another, leaning against the top rail. His nervousness was betrayed by the shaking of the hand which held the cigarette. We smoked, and still I said never a word. At length he broke the silence.

“Are you tired?”

“Not an atom!”

“I should rather like to ask you something.” He hesitated. “It would be more straightforward to say I want to tell you something. I know how ridiculous it is of me to begin babbling like this to the first comer; but, mentally speaking, I’m in a tight place. I’ve got to the point where I simply must tell someone, or else go clean off my head. You’ll understand why, as soon as I’ve told you. Of course, you can do nothing to help me, but keeping my trouble to myself is making me very ill, and you know what fools sick folk are—or what fools they seem to healthy people.”

I interrupted him, and begged him not to distress himself with fancies of that sort, but to go ahead with his story. “Naturally there would be no meaning in my giving you unlimited promises of help, when I don’t know the situation. Still, I can at least assure you of my willingness to give you what help I may. That’s a man’s plain duty, isn’t it, to show that he is ready to pull a fellow-mortal out of a hole? One can try to help, at least.”

“Duty to offer help? Duty to try, at least? Duty to

show that one's ready to pull a fellow-mortal out of a hole?"

Thus did he repeat what I had said, staccato, in a tone of unwonted bitterness flavoured with mockery, whose significance was to become plain to me later. For the moment, there was something in his scanning iteration of my words which made me wonder whether he was mad or drunk.

As if guessing my thoughts, he went on in a more ordinary voice: "You'll perhaps think me queer in the head, or that I've been imbibing too freely in my loneliness. That's not what's the matter, and I'm sane enough —so far! What set me off was one word you used, and the connection in which you happened to use it, the word 'duty'. It touched me on the raw, and I'm raw all over, for the strange thing is that what torments me all the time is a question of duty, duty, duty."

He pulled himself up with a jerk. Without further circumlocution, he began to explain himself clearly.

"I'm a doctor, you must know. That's a vital point in my story. Now, in medical practice one often has to deal with cases in which duty is not so plain as you might think. Fateful cases; you can call them border-line cases, if you like. In these cases there's not just one obvious duty; there are conflicting duties: one duty of the ordinary kind, which runs counter to a duty to the State, and perhaps on the other side runs counter to a duty to science. Help pull a fellow-mortal out of a hole? Of course one should. That's what one's there for. But such maxims are purely theoretical. In a practical instance, how far is help to go? Here you turn up, a nocturnal visitant, and, though you've never seen me before, and I've no claim on you, I ask you not to tell anyone you've seen me. Well, you hold your tongue, because you feel it your duty to help me in the way I ask. Then you turn up again, and I beg you to let me talk to

you because silence is eating my heart out. You are good enough to listen. After all, that's easy enough. I haven't asked you anything very difficult. But suppose I were to say: 'Catch hold of me and throw me overboard!' You would quickly reach the limit of your complaisance, wouldn't you? You would no longer regard it as a 'duty to help', I suppose! There must be a limit somewhere. This duty of which you speak, surely it comes to an end before the point is reached at which one's own life is gravely imperilled, or one's own responsibility to accepted public institutions is affected? Or perhaps this duty to help has no limits at all where a doctor is concerned? Should a doctor be a universal saviour simply because he has a diploma couched in Latin? Has he for that reason to fling away his life when someone happens along and implores him to be helpful and kind-hearted? There is a limit to duty, and you reach it when you're at the end of your tether!"

He went off at a tangent once more.

"I'm sorry to show so much excitement. It's not because I'm drunk. I'm not drunk—yet. True, I'm drinking heavily here on board; and I've got drunk now and again of late, for my life has been so damnably lonely in the East. Just think, for seven years I've been living almost exclusively among natives and animals; and in such conditions you naturally forget how to talk sanely and calmly. When, at last, you get a chance of talking to a man of your own people, your tongue runs away with you. Where was I? I was going to put a question to you, was going to place a problem before you, to ask you whether it was really incumbent on one to help, no matter in what circumstances, as an angel from heaven might help . . . But I'm afraid it will be rather a long business. You're really not tired?"

"Not the least bit in the world!"

He was groping behind him in the darkness. I heard

AMOK

something clink, and could make out the forms of a couple of bottles. He poured from one of them into a glass, and handed it to me—a large peg of neat whisky.

“Won’t you have a drink?”

To keep him company, I sipped, while he, for lack of another glass, took a bountiful swig from the bottle. There was a moment’s silence, during which came five strokes on the ship’s bell. It was half-past two in the morning.

“Well, I want to put a case before you. Suppose there was a doctor practising in a little town—in the country, really. A doctor who . . .”

He broke off, hesitated a while, and then made a fresh start.

“No, that won’t do. I must tell you the whole thing exactly as it happened, and as it happened to myself. A direct narrative from first to last. Otherwise you’ll never be able to understand. There must be no false shame, no concealment. When people come to consult me, they have to strip to the buff, have to show me their excreta. If I am to help them, they must make no bones about informing me as to the most private matters. It will be of no use for me to tell you of something that happened to someone else, to a mythical Doctor Somebody, somewhere and somewhen. I shall strip naked, as if I were your patient. Anyway, I have forgotten all decency in that horrible place where I have been living, in that hideous solitude, in a land which eats the soul out of your body and sucks the marrow out of your bones.”

I must have made some slight movement of protest, for he went off on a side issue.

“Ah, I can see you are an enthusiast for the East, an admirer of the temples and the palm trees, filled full with the romance of the regions where you have been travelling for your pleasure, to while away a month or two. No

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

doubt the tropics are charming to one who hurries or saunters through them by rail, in a motor-car, or in a rickshaw. I felt the same when I first came out seven years ago. I was full of dreams about what I was going to do: learn the native tongue; read the Sacred Books in the original; study tropical diseases; do original scientific work; master the psychology of the indigenes (thus do we phrase it in our European jargon); become a missionary of civilization. . . .

“But life out there is like living in a hot-house with invisible walls. It saps the energies. You get fever, though you swallow quinine by the teaspoonful; and fever takes all the guts out of you, you become limp and lazy, as soft as a jellyfish. A European is cut adrift from his moorings if he has to leave the big towns and is sent to one of those accursed settlements in a jungle or a swamp. Sooner or later he will lose his poise. Some take to drink; others learn opium-smoking from the Chinese; others find relief in brutality, sadism, or what not—they all go off the rails. How one longs for home! To walk along a street with proper buildings in it! To sit in a solidly constructed room with glass windows, and among white men and women. So it goes on year after year, until at length the time for home leave comes round—and a man finds he has grown too inert even to take his furlough. What would be the use? He knows he has been forgotten, and that, if he did go home, there would be no welcome awaiting him or (worse still) his coming might be utterly ignored. So he stays where he is, in a mangrove swamp or in a steaming forest. It was a sad day for me when I sold myself into servitude on the Equator.

“Besides, forgoing my home leave was not quite so voluntary an affair as I have implied. I had studied medicine in Germany, where I was born, and soon after I was qualified I got a good post at the Leipzig Clinic. If you were to look up the files of the medical papers of that

date you would find that a new method of treatment I advocated for one of the commoner diseases made some little stir, so that I had been a good deal talked about for so young a man.

"Then came a love-affair which ruined my chances. It was with a woman whose acquaintance I made at the hospital. She'd been living with a man she'd driven so crazy that he tried to shoot himself and failed to make a clean job of it. Soon I was as crazy as he. She had a sort of cold pride about her which I found irresistible. Women that are domineering and rather impudent can always do anything they like with me, but this woman reduced me to pulp. I did whatever she wanted, and in the end (it seems hard to tell you, though the story's an old one now, dating from eight years ago) for her sake I stole some money from the hospital safe. The thing came out, of course, and there was the devil to pay. An uncle of mine made the loss good, but there was no more career for me in Leipzig.

"Just at this time I heard that the Dutch Government was short of doctors in the colonial service, would take Germans, and was actually offering a premium. That told me there must be a catch in it somewhere, and I knew well enough that in these tropical plantations tombstones grow as luxuriantly as the vegetation. But when you're young you're always ready to believe that fever and death will strike some other fellow down and give you the go-by.

"After all, I hadn't much choice. I made my way to Rotterdam, signed on for ten years, and got a fine, thick wad of banknotes. I sent half of them to my uncle. A girl of the town got the rest—the half of the premium and any other money I could raise—all because she was so like the young woman to whom I owed my downfall. Without money, without even a watch, without illusions, I steamed away from Europe, and was by no means sad

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

at heart when the vessel cleared the port. I sat on deck much as you are sitting now ready to take delight in the East, in the palm trees under new skies ; dreaming of the wonderful forests, of solitude, and of peace.

“I soon had my fill of solitude. They did not station me in Batavia or in Surabaya, in one of the big towns where there are human beings with white skins, a club and a golf course, books and newspapers. They sent me to—well, never mind the name! A God-forgotten place up country, a day’s journey from the nearest town. The ‘society’ consisted of two or three dull-witted and sun-dried officials and one or two half-castes. The settlement was encircled by interminable forests, plantations, jungles, and swamps.

“Still, it was tolerable at first. There was the charm of novelty. I studied hard for a time. Then the Vice-President was making a tour of inspection through the district, and had a motor smash. Compound fracture of the leg, no other doctor within hail, an operation needed, followed by a good recovery—and a considerable amount of kudos for me, since the patient was a big gun. I did some anthropological work, on the poisons and weapons used by the primitives. Until the freshness had worn off, I found a hundred and one things which helped to keep me alive.

“This lasted just as long as the vigour I had brought with me from Europe. Then the climate got hold of me. The other white men in the settlement bored me to death. I shunned their company, began to drink rather heavily, and to browse on my own weary thoughts. After all, I had only to stick it for another two years. Then I could retire on a pension, and start life afresh in Europe. Nothing to do but wait till the time was up. And there I should still be waiting, but for the unexpected happening I am going to tell you about.”

The voice in the darkness ceased. So still was the night that once more I could hear the sound of the ship's stem clearing the water, and the distant pulsing of the machinery. I should have been glad to light a cigarette, but I was afraid I might startle the narrator by any sudden movement and by the unexpected glare.

For a time the silence was unbroken. Had he changed his mind, and decided it would be indiscreet to tell me any more? Had he dropped off into a doze?

While I was thus meditating, six bells struck. It was three in the morning. He stirred, and I heard a faint clink as he picked up the whisky bottle. He was priming himself again. Then he resumed, with a fresh access of tense passion.

“Well, so things went with me. Month after month I had been sitting inactive in that detestable spot, as motionless as a spider in the centre of its web. The rainy season was over. For weeks I had been listening to the downpour on the roof, and not a soul had come near me —no European, that is to say. I had been alone in the house with my native servants and my whisky. Being even more homesick than usual, when I read in a novel about lighted streets and white women my fingers would begin to tremble. You are only what we call a globe-trotter; you don't know the country as those who live there know it. A white man is seized at times by what might be accounted one of the tropical diseases, a nostalgia so acute as to drive him almost into delirium. Well, in some such paroxysm I was poring over an atlas, dreaming of journeys possible and impossible. At this moment two of my servants came, open-mouthed with astonishment, to say that a lady had called to see me—a white lady.

“I, too, was amazed. I had heard no sound of carriage or of car. What the devil was a white woman doing in this wilderness?

"I was sitting in the upstairs veranda of my two-storied house and not dressed for white company. In the minute or two that were needed for me to make myself presentable I was able to pull myself together a little; but I was still nervous, uneasy, filled with disagreeable forebodings, when at length I went downstairs. Who on earth could it be? I was friendless. Why should a white woman come to visit me in the wilds?

"The lady was sitting in the ante-room, and behind her chair was standing a China boy, obviously her servant. As she jumped up to greet me, I saw that her face was hidden by a thick motor-veil. She began to speak before I could say a word.

"'Good morning, Doctor,' she said in English. 'You'll excuse my dropping in like this without an appointment, won't you?' She spoke rather rapidly, almost as if repeating a speech which had been mentally rehearsed. 'When we were driving through the settlement and had to stop the car for a moment, I remembered that you lived here.' This was puzzling! If she had come in a car, why hadn't she driven up to the house? 'I've heard so much about you—what a wonder you worked when the Vice-Resident had that accident. I saw him the other day playing golf as well as ever. Your name is in everyone's mouth down there, and we'd all gladly give away our grumpy old senior surgeon and his two assistants if we could but get you in exchange. Besides, why do you never come to headquarters? You live up here like a yogi!'

"She ran on and on, without giving me a chance to get in a word edgewise. Manifestly her loquacity was the outcome of nervousness, and it made me nervous in my turn. 'Why does she go on chattering like this?' I wondered. 'Why doesn't she tell me who she is? Why doesn't she take off her veil? Has she got fever? Is she a madwoman? I grew more and more distract, feeling

like a fool as I stood there mumchance while she overwhelmed me with her babble. At length the stream ran dry, so that I was able to invite her upstairs. She made a sign to the boy to stay where he was, and swept up the stairway in front of me.

“‘Pleasant quarters here,’ she exclaimed, letting her gaze roam over my sitting-room. ‘Ah, what lovely books! How I should like to read them all!’ She strolled to the bookcase and began to con the titles. For the first time since she had said good-morning to me, she was silent for a space.

“‘May I offer you a cup of tea?’ I inquired.

“She answered without turning round:

“‘No, thank you, Doctor. I’ve only a few minutes to spare. Hullo, there’s Flaubert’s *Education sentimentale*. What a book! So you read French, too. Wonderful people, you Germans—they teach you so many languages at school. It must be splendid to be able to speak them as you do. The Vice-President swears he would never allow anyone but you to use a knife on him. That senior surgeon of ours, all he’s fit for is bridge. But you—well, it came into my head to-day that I should like to consult you, and as I was driving through the settlement I thought to myself, “There’s no time like the present!”’ But—all this she said without looking at me, for she kept her face towards the books—‘I expect you’re frightfully busy. Perhaps I’d better call another day?’

“‘Are you going to show your cards at last?’ I wondered. Of course I gave no sign of this, but assured her that I was at her service, now or later, as she preferred.

“‘Oh, well, since I’m here!’ She turned half round towards me, but did not look up, continuing to flutter the pages of a book she had taken from the shelf. ‘It’s nothing serious. The sort of troubles women often have. Giddiness, fainting-fits, nausea. This morning in the car,

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

when we were rounding a curve, I suddenly lost my senses completely. The boy had to hold me up, or I should have slipped on to the floor. He got me some water, and then I felt better. I suppose the chauffeur must have been driving too fast. Don't you think so, Doctor?"

"I can't answer that off-hand. Have you had many such fainting-fits?"

"No. Not until recently, that is. During the last few weeks, pretty often. And I've been feeling so sick in the mornings."

"She was back at the bookcase, had taken down another volume, and was fluttering the pages as before. Why did she behave so strangely? Why didn't she lift her veil and look me in the face? Purposely I made no answer. It pleased me to let her wait. If she could behave queerly, so could I! At length she went on, in her nonchalant, detached way.

"You agree, don't you, Doctor? It can't be anything serious. Not one of those horrid tropical diseases, surely? Nothing dangerous."

"I must see if you have any fever. Let me feel your pulse."

"I moved towards her, but she evaded me.

"No, Doctor, I'm sure I have no fever. I've taken my temperature every day since . . . since I began to be troubled with this faintness. Never above normal. And my digestion's all right, too."

"I hesitated for a little. The visitor's strange manner had aroused my suspicions. Obviously she wanted to get something out of me. She had not driven a couple of hundred miles into this remote corner in order to discuss Flaubert! I kept her waiting for a minute or two before saying: 'Excuse me, but may I ask you a few plain questions?'

"Of course, of course. One comes to a doctor for

that,' she said lightly. But she had turned her back on me again, and was fiddling with the books.

“ ‘Have you had any children?’

“ ‘Yes, one, a boy.’

“ ‘Well, did you have the same sort of symptoms then, in the early months, when you were pregnant?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“ The answer was decisive, blunt, and no longer in the tone of mere prattle which had characterized her previous utterances.

“ ‘Well, isn’t it possible that that’s what’s the matter with you now?’”

“ ‘Yes.’

“ Again the response was sharp and decisive.

“ ‘You’d better come into my consulting-room. An examination will settle the question in a moment.’

“ At length she turned to face me squarely, and I could almost feel her eyes piercing me through her veil.

“ ‘No need for that, Doctor. I haven’t a shadow of doubt as to my condition.’”

A pause.

I heard the narrator take another dose of his favourite stimulant. Then he resumed :

“ Think the matter over for yourself. I had been rotting away there in my loneliness, and then this woman turned up from nowhere, the first white woman I had seen for years—and I felt as if something evil, something dangerous, had come into my room. Her iron determination made my flesh creep. She had come, it seemed, for idle chatter; and then without warning she voiced a demand as if she were throwing a knife at me. For what she wanted of me was plain enough. That was not the first time women had come to me with such a request. But they had come imploringly, had with tears besought me to help them in their trouble. Here, however, was a woman of exceptional, of virile, determination. From the

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

outset I had felt that she was stronger than I, that she could probably mould me to her will. Yet if there were evil in the room, it was in me likewise, in me the man. Bitterness had risen in me, a revolt against her. I had sensed in her an enemy.

“For a time I maintained an obstinate silence. I felt that she was eyeing me from behind her veil, that she was challenging me; that she wanted to force me to speak. But I was not ready to comply. When I did answer, I spoke beside the point, as if unconsciously mimicking her discursive and indifferent manner. I pretended that I had not understood her; tried to compel her to be candid. I was unwilling to meet her half-way. I wanted her to implore me, as the others had done—wanted it for the very reason that she had approached me so imperiously, and precisely because I knew myself to be a weakling in face of such arrogance as hers.

“Consequently, I talked all round the subject, saying that her symptoms were of trifling importance, that such fainting-fits were common form in early pregnancy, and that, far from being ominous, they generally meant that things would go well. I quoted cases I had seen and cases I had read of; I treated the whole affair as a bagatelle; I talked and talked, waiting for her to interrupt me. For I knew she would have to cut me short.

“She did so with a wave of the hand, as if sweeping my words of reassurance into the void.

“That’s not what worries me, Doctor. I’m not so well as I was the time before. My heart troubles me.’

“‘Heart trouble, you say?’ I rejoined, feigning an anxiety I did not feel. ‘Well, I’d better go into that at once.’ I made a movement as if to reach for my stethoscope.

“Once more she was recalcitrant. She spoke commanding, almost like a drill-sergeant.

“‘You may take my word for it that I have heart

trouble. I don't want to waste my time and yours with examinations that are quite unnecessary. Besides, I think you might show a little more confidence in what I tell you. I have trusted you to the full !'

"This was a declaration of war. She had thrown down the glove and I did not hesitate to lift it.

"Trust implies frankness, perfect frankness. Please speak to me straightforwardly. But above all take off your veil and sit down. Let the books alone and put your cards on the table. It's not usual to keep a veil on when one comes to consult a medical man.'

"In her turn she accepted the challenge. Sitting down in front of me, she lifted her veil. The face thus disclosed was the sort of face I had dreaded ; it was controlled and inscrutable ; one of those exceptionally beautiful English faces which age cannot wither ; but this lovely woman was still quite young, this woman with grey eyes that seemed so full of self-confident repose and yet to hint at depths of passion. Her lips were firmly set and would betray nothing she wished to keep to herself. For a full minute we gazed at one another ; she imperiously and yet questioningly, with a look almost cruelly cold, so that in the end I had to lower my eyes.

"Her knuckles rattled against the table. She could not shake off her nervousness. Suddenly she said :

"Doctor, do you or do you not know what I want of you?"

"I can make a shrewd guess, I fancy? Let us speak plainly. You want to put an end to your present condition. You want me to free you from the fainting-fits, the nausea, and so on—by removing the cause. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"The word was as decisive as the fall of the knife in a guillotine.

"Are you aware that such things are dangerous—to both the persons concerned?"

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘That the operation is illegal?’

“ ‘I know that there are circumstances in which it is not prohibited ; nay, in which it is regarded as essential.’

“ ‘Yes, when there are good medical grounds for undertaking it.’

“ ‘Well, you can find such grounds. You are a doctor.’

“ She looked at me without a quiver, as if issuing an order ; and I, the weakling, trembled in my amazement at the elemental power of her resolve. Yet I still resisted. I would not let her see that she was too strong for me. ‘Not so fast,’ I thought. ‘Make difficulties ! Compel her to sue !’

“ ‘A doctor cannot always find sufficient reasons. Still, I don’t mind having a consultation with one of my colleagues. . . .’

“ ‘I don’t want one of your colleagues. It is you I have come to consult.’

“ ‘Why me, may I ask?’

“ She regarded me coldly, and said :

“ ‘I don’t mind telling you that ! I came to you because you live in an out-of-the-way place, because you have never met me before, because your known ability, and because she hesitated for the first time, ‘because . . . you are not likely to stay in Java much longer —especially if you have a large sum of money in hand to go home with.’

“ A shiver ran through me. This mercantile calculation made my flesh creep. No tears, no beseeching. She had taken my measure, had reckoned up my price, and had sought me out in full confidence that she could mould me to her will. In truth I was almost overpowered ; but her attitude towards me filled me with gall, and I constrained myself to reply with a chilly, almost sarcastic inflection :

“ ‘This large sum of money you speak of, you offer it me for . . . ?’

“ ‘For your help now, to be followed by your immediate departure from the Dutch Indies.’

“ ‘Surely you must know that that would cost me my pension?’

“ ‘The fee I propose would more than compensate you.’

“ ‘You are good enough to use plain terms, but I should like you to be even more explicit. What fee were you thinking of?’

“ ‘One hundred thousand gulden, in a draft on Amsterdam.’

“ I trembled, both with anger and surprise. She had reckoned it all out, had calculated my price, and offered me this preposterous fee upon the condition that I should break my contract with the Dutch Government; she had bought me before seeing me; she had counted on my compliance. I felt like slapping her face, so angered was I by this contumelious treatment. But when I rose up in my wrath (she, too, was standing once more), the sight of that proud, cold mouth of hers which would not beg a favour, the flash of her arrogant eyes, aroused the brute in me, and of a sudden I burned with desire. Something in my expression must have betrayed my feeling, for she raised her eyebrows as one does when a beggar is importunate. In that instant we hated one another, and were aware of our mutual detestation. She hated me because she had to make use of me, and I hated her because she demanded my help instead of imploring it. In this moment of silence we were for the first time speaking frankly to one another. As if a venomous serpent had bitten me, a terrible thought entered my mind, and I said to her . . . I said to her . . .

“ But I go too fast, and you will misunderstand me. I must first of all explain to you whence this crazy notion came.”

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

He paused. More whisky. His voice was stronger when he resumed.

"I'm not trying to make excuses for myself. But I don't want you to misunderstand me. I suppose I've never been what is called a 'good' man, and yet I think I've always been ready to help people whenever I could. In the rotten sort of life I had to live out there, my one pleasure was to use the knowledge I had scraped together and thus to give poor sick wretches new hopes of health. That's a creative pleasure, you know; makes a man feel as if, for once, he were a god. It was pure delight to me when a brown-skinned Javanese was brought in, foot swollen to the size of his head from snake-bite, shrieking with terror lest the only thing that would save him might be an amputation—and I was able to save both life and leg. I have driven hours into the jungle to help a native woman laid up with fever. At Leipzig, in the clinic, I was ready enough, sometimes, to help women in just the same plight as my lady here. But in those cases, at least, one felt that one's patient had come to one in bitter need, asking to be rescued from death or from despair. It was the feeling of another's need that made me ready to help.

"But this particular woman—how can I make you understand. She had irritated me from the first moment when she dropped in with the pretence that she was on a casual excursion. Her arrogance had set my back up. Her manner had aroused the slumbering demon, the Caliban that lies hidden in us all. I was furious that she should come to me with her fine-lady airs, with her assumption of dispassionateness in what was really a life-or-death matter. Besides, a woman does not get into the family way from playing golf, or some such trifle. I pictured to myself with exasperating plainness that this imperious creature, so cold, so aloof—for whom I was to be a mere instrument, and, apart from that, of no more significance to her than the dirt beneath her feet—must,

only two or three months before, have been passionate enough when clasped in the arms of the father of this unborn child she now wished me to destroy. Such was the thought which obsessed me. She had approached me with supercilious contempt; but I would make her mine with all the virile masterfulness and impetus and ardour of that unknown man. This is what I want you to grasp. Never before had I tried to take advantage of my position as a doctor. If I did so now, it was not from lust, not from an animal longing for sexual possession. I assure you it was not. I was moved by the craving to master her pride, to prove myself a dominant male, and thus to assert the supremacy of my ego over hers.

"I have already told you that arrogant, seemingly cold women have always exercised a peculiar power over me. Superadded to this, on the present occasion, was the fact that for seven years I had not had a white woman in my arms, had never encountered resistance in my wooing. Native girls are timorous little creatures who tremble with respectful ecstasy when a 'white lord,' a 'tuan,' deigns to take possession of them. They are overflowing with humility, always ready to give themselves for the asking—with a servility that robs voluptuousness of its tang. The Arab girls are different, I believe, and perhaps even the Chinese and the Malays; but I had been living among the Javanese. You can understand, then, how thrilled I was by this woman, so haughty and fierce and reserved; so brimful of mystery, and gravid with the fruit of a recent passion. You can realize what it meant to me that such a woman should walk boldly into the cage of such a man as I—a veritable beast, lonely, starved, cut off from human fellowship. I tell you all this that you may understand what follows. Those were the thoughts that coursed through my brain, those were the impulses that stirred me, when, simulating indifference, I said coolly:

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

“ ‘One hundred thousand gulden? No, I won’t do it for that.’

“She looked at me, paling a little. No doubt she felt intuitively that the obstacle was not a matter of money. All she said, however, was:

“ ‘What fee do you ask, then?’

“ ‘Let’s be frank with one another,’ I rejoined. ‘I am no trader. You must not look upon me as the poverty-stricken apothecary in “Romeo and Juliet” who vends poison for the “worse poison,” gold. You will never get what you want from me if you regard me as a mere man of business.’

“ ‘You won’t do it, then?’

“ ‘Not for money.’

“For a moment there was silence. The room was so still that I could hear her breathing.

“ ‘What else can you want?’

“I answered hotly:

“ ‘I want, first of all, that you should approach me, not as a trader, but as a man. That when you need help you should come to me, not with a parade of your gold “that’s poison to men’s souls,” but with a prayer to me, the human being, that I should help you, the human being. I am not only a doctor. “Hours of Consultation” are not the only hours I have to dispose of. There are other hours as well—and you may have chanced upon me in one of those other hours.’

“A brief silence followed. Then she pursed up her lips, and said :

“ ‘So you would do it if I were to implore you?’

“ ‘I did not say so. You are still trying to bargain, and will only plead if you have my implied promise. Plead first, and then I will answer you.’

“She tossed her head defiantly, like a spirited horse.

“ ‘I will not plead for your help. I would rather die.’

“I saw red, and answered furiously.

" 'If you will not sue, I will demand. I think there is no need of words. You know already what I want. When you have given it, I will help you.'

"She stared at me for a moment. Then (how can I make you realize the horror of it?) the tension of her features relaxed and she burst out laughing. She laughed with a contempt which at once ground me to powder and intoxicated me to madness. It came like an explosion of incredible violence, this disdainful laughter; and its effect on me was such that I wanted to abase myself before her, longed to kiss her feet. The energy of her scorn blasted me like lightning—and in that instant she turned, and made for the door.

"Involuntarily I pursued her to mumble excuses, to pray forgiveness, so crushed was I in spirit. But she faced me before leaving, to say, to command:

" 'Do not dare to follow me, or try to find out who I am. If you do, you will repent it.'

"In a flash, she was gone."

Further hesitation. Another silence. Then the voice issued from the darkness once more.

"She vanished through the doorway, and I stood rooted to the spot. I was, as it were, hypnotized by her prohibition. I heard her going downstairs; I heard the house-door close; I heard everything. I longed to follow her. Why? I don't know whether it was to call her back, to strike her, to strangle her. Anyhow, I wanted to follow her—and could not. It was as if her fierce answer had paralysed me. I know this will sound absurd; such, however, was the fact. Minutes passed—five, ten, it may be—before I could stir.

"But as soon as I made the first movement, the spell was broken. I rushed down the stairs. There was only one road by which she could have gone, first to the settlement, and thence back to civilization. I hastened to the

shed to get my bicycle, only to find that I had forgotten the key. Without waiting to fetch it I dragged the frail bamboo door from its hinges and seized the wheel. Next moment I was pedalling madly down the road in pursuit. I must catch her up ; I must overtake her before she could get to her car ; I must speak to her.

“The dusty track unrolled itself in front of me, and the distance I had to ride before I caught sight of her showed me how long I must have stood entranced after she left. There she was at last, where the road curved round the forest just before entering the settlement. She was walking quickly ; behind her strode the China boy. She must have become aware of my pursuit the instant I saw her, for she stopped to speak to the boy and then went on alone, while he stood waiting. Why did she go on alone? Did she want to speak to me where no one could listen? I put on a spurt, when suddenly the boy, as I was about to pass him, leapt in front of me. I swerved to avoid him, ran up the bank, and fell.

“I was on my feet again in an instant, cursing the boy, and I raised my fist to deal him a blow, but he evaded it. Not bothering about him any more, I picked up my bicycle and was about to remount when the rascal sprang forward and seized the handle-bar, saying in pidgin-English :

“ ‘Master stoppee here.’

“You haven’t lived in the tropics. You can hardly realize the intolerable impudence of such an action on the part of a native, and a servant at that. A yellow beast of a China boy actually presumed to catch hold of my bicycle and to tell me, a white ‘tuan,’ to stay where I was! My natural answer was to give him one between the eyes. He staggered, but maintained his grip on the cycle. His slit-like, slanting eyes were full of slavish fear, but for all that he was stout of heart, and would not let go.

AMOK

“ ‘Master stoppee here!’ he repeated.

“It was lucky I had not brought my automatic pistol. Had I had it with me, I should certainly have shot him then and there.

“ ‘Let go, you dog!’ I shouted.

“He stared at me, panic-stricken, but would not obey. In a fury and feeling sure that further delay would enable her to escape me, I gave him a knock-out blow on the chin, which crumbled him up in the road.

“Now the cycle was free; but, when I tried to mount, I found that the front wheel had been buckled in the fall and would not turn. After a vain attempt to straighten the wheel, I flung the machine in the dust beside the China boy (who, bleeding from my violence, was coming to his senses) and ran along the road into the settlement.

“Yes, I ran; and here again, you, who have not lived in the tropics, will find it hard to realize all that this implies. For a white man, a European, thus to forget his dignity, and to run before a lot of staring natives, is to make himself a laughing-stock. Well, I was past thinking of my dignity. I ran like a madman in front of the huts, where the inmates gaped to see the settlement doctor, the white lord, running like a rickshaw coolie.

“I was dripping with sweat when I reached the settlement.

“ ‘Where’s the car?’ I shouted, breathless.

“ ‘Just gone, Tuan,’ came the answer.

“They were staring at me in astonishment. I must have looked like a lunatic, wet and dirty, as I shouted out my question the moment I was within hail. Glancing down the road I saw, no longer the car, but the dust raised by its passing. She had made good her escape. Her device of leaving the boy to hinder me had been successful.

“Yet, after all, her flight availed her nothing. In the

tropics the names and the doings of the scattered members of the ruling European caste are known to all. From this outlook, Java is but a big village where gossip is rife. While she had been visiting me, her chauffeur had spent an idle hour in the settlement headquarters. Within a few minutes I knew everything; knew her name and that she lived in the provincial capital more than a hundred and fifty miles away. She was (as, indeed, I knew already) an Englishwoman. Her husband was a Dutch merchant, fabulously rich. He had been away five months, on a business journey in America, and was expected back in a few days. Then husband and wife were to pay a visit to England.

"Her husband had been five months away. It had been obvious to me that she could not be more than three months pregnant.

"Till now it has been easy enough for me to explain everything to you clearly, for up to this point my motives were plain to myself. As a doctor, a trained observer, I could readily diagnose my own condition. But from now on I was like a man in delirium. I had completely lost self-control. I knew how preposterous were my actions, and yet I went on doing them. Have you ever heard of 'running amuck'?"

"Yes, I think so. It's some sort of drunken frenzy among the Malays, isn't it?"

"More than drunkenness. More than frenzy. It's a condition which makes a man behave like a rabid dog, transforms him into a homicidal maniac. It's a strange and terrible mental disorder. I've seen cases of it and studied them carefully while in the East, without ever being able to clear up its true nature. It's partly an outcome of the climate, of the sultry, damp, oppressive atmosphere, which strains the nerves until at last they snap. Of course a Malay who runs amuck has generally

AMOK

been in trouble of some sort—jealousy, gambling losses, or what not. The man will be sitting quietly, as if there were nothing wrong—just as I was sitting in my room before she came to see me.

“Suddenly he will spring to his feet, seize his kris, dash into the street, and run headlong, no matter where. He stabs any who happen to find themselves in his path, and the shedding of blood infuriates him more and more. He foams at the mouth, shouts as he runs, tears on and on, brandishing his blood-stained dagger. Everyone knows that nothing but death will stop the madman; they scurry out of his way, shouting ‘Amok, Amok,’ to warn others. Thus he runs, killing, killing, killing, until he is shot down like the mad dog that he is.

“It is because I have seen Malays running amuck that I know so well what was my condition during those days, those days still so recent, those days about which I am going to tell you. Like such a Malay, I ran my furious course in pursuit of that Englishwoman, looking neither to the right nor to the left, obsessed with the one thought of seeing her again. I can scarcely remember all I did in the hurried moments before I actually set out on her trail. Within a minute or two of learning her name and where she lived, I had borrowed a bicycle and was racing back to my own quarters. I flung a spare suit or two into a valise; stuffed a bundle of notes into my pocket, and rode off to the nearest railway station. I did not report to the district officer; I made no arrangements about a substitute; I left the house just as it was, paying no heed to the servants who gathered round me asking for instructions. Within an hour from the time when that woman had first called to see me, I had broken with the past and was running amuck into the void.

“In truth I gained nothing by my haste, as I should have known had I been able to think. It was late afternoon when I got to the railway station, and in the

Javanese mountains the trains do not run after dark for fear of wash-outs. After a sleepless night in the dak-bungalow, and a day's journey by rail, at six in the evening I reached the town where she lived, feeling sure that, by car, she would have got there long before me. Within ten minutes I was at her door. 'What could have been more senseless?' you will say. I know, I know; but one who is running amuck runs amuck; he does not look where he is going.

"I sent in my card. The servant (not the China boy—I suppose he had not turned up yet) came back to say that his mistress was not well enough to see anyone.

"I stumbled into the street. For an hour or more I hung around the house, in the forlorn hope that perhaps she would relent and would send out for me. Then I took a room at a neighbouring hotel and had a couple of bottles of whisky sent upstairs. With these and a stiff dose of veronal I at length managed to drug myself into unconsciousness—a heavy sleep that was the only interlude in the race from life to death."

Eight bells struck. It was four in the morning. The sudden noise startled the narrator, and he broke off abruptly. In a little while, however, collecting himself, he went on with his story.

"It is hard to describe the hours that followed. I think I must have had fever. Anyhow I was in a state of irritability bordering on madness. I was running amuck. It was on Tuesday evening that I got to the coast town, and, as I learned next morning, her husband was expected on Saturday. There were three clear days during which I might help her out of her trouble. I knew there wasn't a moment to waste—and she wouldn't see me! My longing to help, and my longing (still greater, if possible) to excuse myself for my insane demand, intensified the disorder of my nerves. Every second was

precious. The whole thing hung by a hair and I had behaved so outrageously that she would not let me come near her. Imagine that you are running after someone to warn him against an assassin and that he takes you for the would-be assassin, so that he flees from you towards destruction. All that she could see in me was the frenzied pursuer who had humiliated her with a base proposal and now wanted to renew it.

“That was the absurdity of the whole thing. My one wish was to help her and she would not see me. I would have committed any crime to help her, but she did not know.

“Next morning when I called, the China boy was standing at the door. I suppose that he had got back by the same train as myself. He must have been on the look-out; for the instant I appeared he whisked out of sight—though not before I had seen the bruises on his face. Perhaps he had only hurried in to announce my coming. That is one of the things that madden me now, to think that she may have realized that, after all, I wanted to help, and may have been ready to receive me. But the sight of him reminded me of my shame, so that I turned back from the door without venturing to send in my name. I went away; went away in torment when she, perhaps, in no less torment, was awaiting me.

“I did not know how to pass the weary hours in this unfamiliar town. At length it occurred to me to call on the Vice-Resident, the man whose leg I had set to rights up country after he had had a motor smash. He was at home, and was, of course, delighted to see me. Did I tell you that I can speak Dutch as fluently as any Dutchman? I was at school in Holland for a couple of years. That was one reason why I chose the Dutch colonial service when I had to clear out of Leipzig.

“There must have been something queer about my manner, though. My grateful patient, for all his civility,

eyed me askance, as if he divined that I was running amuck! I told him I had come to ask for a transfer. I couldn't live in the wilds any longer. I wanted an instant remove to the provincial capital. He looked at me questioningly, and in a non-committal way—much as a medical man looks at a patient.

“‘A nervous break-down, Doctor?’ he inquired. ‘I understand that only too well. We can arrange matters for you, but you’ll have to wait for a little while; three or four weeks, let us say, while we’re finding someone to relieve you at your present post.’

“‘Three or four weeks!’ I exclaimed. ‘I can’t wait a single day!’

“Again that questioning look.

“‘I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with it, Doctor. We mustn’t leave your station unattended. Still, I promise you I’ll set matters in train this very day.’

“I stood there biting my lips and realizing for the first time how completely I had sold myself into slavery. It was in my mind to defy him and his regulations; but he was tactful, he was indebted to me, and he did not want an open breach. Forestalling my determination to reply angrily, he went on:

“‘You’ve been living like a hermit, you know, and that’s enough to put anyone’s nerves on edge. We’ve all been wondering why you never asked for leave, why you never came to see us down here. Some cheerful company, now and then, would have done you all the good in the world. This evening, by the way, there’s a reception at Government House. Won’t you join us? The whole colony will be there, including a good many people who have often asked about you and have wanted very much to make your acquaintance.’

“At this I pricked up my ears. ‘Asked about me?’ ‘Wanted to make my acquaintance?’ Was she one of them? The thought was like wine to me. I remembered

my manners, thanked him for his invitation and promised to come early.

“I did go early, too early! Spurred on by impatience, I was the first to appear in the great drawing-room at the Residency. There I had to sit cooling my heels and listening to the soft tread of the bare-footed native servants who went to and fro about their business and (so it seemed to my morbid imagination) were sniggering at me behind my back. For a quarter of an hour I was the only guest amid a silence which, when the servants had finished their preparations, became so profound that I could hear the ticking of my watch in my pocket.

“Then the other guests began to arrive, some government officials with their wives, and the Vice-Resident put in an appearance. He welcomed me most graciously, and entered into a long conversation in which (I think) I was able to keep my end up all right—until, of a sudden, my nervousness returned and I began to falter.

“She had entered the room and it was a good thing that at this moment the Vice-Resident wound up his talk with me and began a conversation with someone else, for otherwise I believe I should simply have turned my back on the man. She was dressed in yellow silk, which set off her ivory shoulders admirably, and was talking brightly amid a group. Yet I, who knew her secret trouble, could read (or fancied I could read) care beneath her smile. I moved nearer, but she did not or would not see me. That smile of hers maddened me once more, for I knew it to be feigned. ‘To-day is Wednesday,’ I thought. ‘On Saturday her husband will be back. How can she smile so unconcernedly? How can she toy with her fan, instead of breaking it with a convulsive clutch?’

“I, a stranger, was trembling in face of what awaited her. I, a stranger, had for two days been suffering with her suffering. What could her smile be but a mask to hide the storm that raged within?

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

"From the next room came the sound of music. Dancing was to begin. A middle-aged officer claimed her as his partner. Excusing herself to those with whom she had been conversing, she took his arm and walked with him towards the ballroom. This brought her close to me and she could not fail to see me. For a moment she was startled, and then (before I could make up my mind whether or not to claim acquaintance) she nodded in a friendly way, said 'Good evening, Doctor,' and passed on.

"No one could have guessed what lay hidden behind that casual glance. Indeed, I myself was puzzled. Why had she openly recognized me? Was she making an advance, an offer of reconciliation? Was she still on the defensive? Had she merely been taken by surprise? How could I tell? All I knew was that I had been stirred to the depths.

"I watched her as she waltzed, a smile of enjoyment playing about her lips, and I knew that all the while she must be thinking, not of the dance, but of the one thing of which I was thinking, of the dread secret which she and I alone shared. The thought intensified (if possible) my anxiety, my longing, and my bewilderment. I don't know if anyone else was observing me, but I am sure that my eager scrutiny of her must have been in manifest contrast to her ostensible unconcern. I simply could not look at anyone but her, for I was watching all the time to see whether she would not, were it but for a moment, let the mask fall. The fixity of my stare must have been disagreeable to her. As she came back on her partner's arm, she flashed a look at me, dictatorial, angry, as if bidding me to exercise a little more self-control.

"But I, as I have explained to you, was running amuck. I knew well enough what her glance meant! 'Don't attract attention to me like this. Keep yourself in hand.' She was asking me to show some discretion in this place

of public assembly. I felt assured now, that if I went quietly home she would receive me should I call on the morrow; that all she wanted of me was that I should behave decorously; that she was (with good reason) afraid of my making a scene. Yes, I understood what she wanted; but I was running amuck and I had to speak to her there and then. I moved over to the group amid which she was talking. They were all strangers to me; yet I rudely shouldered my way in among them. There I stood my ground listening to her, though I trembled like a whipped cur whenever her eyes rested coldly on mine. I was obviously unwelcome. No one said a word to me and it must have been plain that she resented my intrusion.

“I cannot tell how long I should have gone on standing there. To all eternity, perhaps. I was spellbound. To her, however, the strain became unbearable. Suddenly she broke off and, with a charming and convincing assumption of indifference, said: ‘Well, I’m rather tired so I shall turn in early. I’ll ask you to excuse me. Good night!’

“She gave a friendly nod which included me with the others, and turned away. I watched her smooth, white, well-shaped back above her yellow silk gown and at first (so dazed was I) I scarcely realized that I was to see her no more that evening, that I was to have no word with her on that last evening to which I had looked forward as the evening of salvation. I stood stock-still until I grasped this. Then . . . then . . .

“I must put the whole picture before you, if I am to make you understand what an idiot I made of myself. The big drawing-room at the Residency was now almost empty, though blazing with light. Most of the guests were dancing in the ballroom, while the older men who had lost taste for pairing off in this way had settled down to cards elsewhere. There were but a few scattered

groups talking here and there. Across this huge hall she walked, with that dignity and grace which enthralled me, nodding farewell to one and to another as she passed. By the time I had fully taken in the situation she was at the other end of the room and about to leave it. At that instant, becoming aware that she would escape me, I started to run after her, yes, to run, my pumps clattering as I sped across the polished floor. Of course everyone stared at me, and I was overwhelmed with shame—yet I could not stop. I caught her up as she reached the door, and she turned on me, her eyes blazing, her nostrils quivering with scorn.

“But she had the self-command which in me was so lamentably lacking, and in an instant she had mastered her anger and burst out laughing. With ready wit, speaking loudly so that all could hear, she said :

“ ‘Ah, Doctor, so you’ve just remembered that prescription for my little boy, after all! You men of science are apt to be forgetful now and again, aren’t you?’

“ Two men standing near by grinned good-humouredly. I understood, admired the skill with which she was glossing over my clownishness, and had the sense to take her hint. Pulling out my pocket-book, in which there were some prescription blanks, I tore one off and handed it to her with a muttered apology. Taking the paper from me with a smile and a ‘Good night!’ she departed.

“ She had saved the situation ; but I felt that, as far as my position with her was concerned, the case was hopeless, that she loathed me for my insensate folly, hated me more than death ; that again and again and again (however often I might come) she would drive me from her door like a dog.

“ I stumbled across the room, people staring at me. No doubt there was something strange about my appearance. Making my way to the buffet, I drank four glasses

of brandy in brief succession. My nerves were worn to rags and nothing but this overdose of stimulant would have kept me going. I slipped away by a side door, furtively, as if I had been a burglar. Not for a kingdom would I have crossed the great hall again, have exposed myself to mocking eyes. What did I do next? I can hardly remember. Wandering from one saloon to another, I tried to drink myself into oblivion; but nothing could dull my senses. Still I heard the laugh which had first driven me crazy and the feigned laughter with which she had covered up my boorishness that evening. Walking on the quays, I looked down into the water, and regretted bitterly that I had not brought my pistol with me so that I could blow out my brains and drop into the quiet pool. My mind became fixed on this automatic and I resolved to make an end of myself. I wearily went back to the hotel.

"If I refrained from shooting myself in the small hours, it was not, believe me, from cowardice. Nothing I should have liked better than to press the trigger, in the conviction that thus I could put an end to the torment of my thoughts. After all, I was obsessed by the idea of duty, that accursed notion of duty. It maddened me to think that she might still have need of me, to know that she really did need me. Here was Thursday morning. In two days her husband would be back. I was sure this proud woman would never live to face the shame that must ensue upon discovery. I tramped up and down my room for hours, turning these thoughts over in my mind, cursing the impatience, the blunders, that had made it impossible for me to help her. How was I to approach her now? How was I to convince her that all I asked was to be allowed to serve her? She would not see me, she would not see me. In fancy I heard her fierce laughter and watched her nostrils twitching with contempt. Up and down, up and down the ten feet of my

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

narrow room till the tropic day had dawned and speedily the morning sun was glaring into the veranda. As you know, in the tropics everyone is up and about by six.

“Flinging myself into a chair, I seized some letter-paper and began to write to her, anything, everything, a cringing letter, in which I implored her forgiveness, proclaimed myself a madman and a villain, besought her to trust me, to put herself in my hands after all. I swore that I would disappear thereafter, from the town, the colony, the world, if she wanted me to. Let her only forgive me and trust me, allow me to help her in this supreme moment.

“I covered twenty pages. It must have been a fantastic letter, like one penned in a lunatic asylum or by a man in the delirium of fever. When I had finished, I was dripping with sweat and the room whirled round me as I rose to my feet. Gulping down a glass of water, I tried to read through what I had written, but the words swam before my eyes. I reached for an envelope and then it occurred to me to add something that might move her. Snatching up the pen once more, I scrawled across the back of the last page: ‘Shall await a word of forgiveness here at the hotel. If I don’t hear from you before nightfall, I shall shoot myself.’

“Closing the letter, I shouted for one of the boys and told him to have the chit delivered instantly. There was nothing more for me to do but to await an answer.”

As if to mark this interval, it was some minutes before he spoke again. When he did so, the words came with a renewed impetus.

“Christianity has lost its meaning for me. The old myths of heaven and hell no longer influence me. But if there were a hell I should dread it little, for there could be no hell worse than those hours I spent in the hotel. A

little room, baking in the noonday heat. You know these hotel rooms in the tropics—only a bed and a table and a chair. Nothing on the table but a watch and an automatic. Sitting on the chair in front of the table a man staring at the watch and the pistol—a man who ate nothing, drank nothing, did not even smoke, but sat without stirring as he looked at the dial of his watch and saw the second hand making its unending circuit. That was how I spent the day, waiting, waiting, waiting. And yet, for all that I was motionless, I was still like the Malay running amuck or like a rabid dog, pursuing my frenzied course to destruction.

“Well, I won’t make any further attempt to describe those hours. Enough to say that I don’t understand how anyone can live through such a time and keep reasonably sane.

“At twenty-two minutes past three (my eyes were still glued to the watch) there came a knock at the door. A native youngster with a folded scrap of paper—no envelope. I snatched it from him and he was gone before I had time to tear open the note. Then, to begin with, I could not read the brief message. Here was her reply at last and the words ran together before my eyes! They conveyed no meaning to me. I had to dip my head in cold water and calm my agitation before my senses cleared and I could grasp the meaning of the pencilled English.

“Too late! Still, you’d better stay at the hotel. Perhaps I shall have to send for you in the end.’

“There was no signature on the crumpled page, a blank half-sheet torn from a prospectus or something of the kind. The writing was unsteady, perhaps from agitation, perhaps because it had been written in a moving carriage. How could I tell? All I knew was that anxiety, haste, horror, seemed to cling to it; that it gripped me profoundly; and yet that I was glad, for at

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

least she had written to me. I was to keep alive, for she might need me, she might let me help her after all. I lost myself in the maddest conjectures and hopes. I read the curt words again and again; I kissed them repeatedly; I grew calmer, and passed into a stage betwixt sleep and waking when time no longer had any meaning—coma vigil is what we doctors call it.

“This must have lasted for hours. Dusk was at hand when I came to myself with a start, so it was certainly near six o’clock. Had there been another knock? I listened intently. Then it was unmistakable—a knocking, gentle yet insistent. Unsteady (for I felt giddy and faint) I sprang to the door. There in the passage stood the China boy. It was still light enough to show me, not only the traces of my rough handling, not only black eyes and a bruised chin, but that his yellow face was ashen pale.

“‘Master, come quickly.’ That was all.

“I ran downstairs, the boy at my heels. A gharry was waiting and we jumped in.

“‘What has happened?’ I asked, as the man drove off without further orders.

“The boy looked at me, his lips twitched, but he said never a word. I repeated my question; still he was silent. I felt angry enough to strike him once more; yet I was touched by his devotion to his mistress and so I kept myself in hand. If he wouldn’t speak, he wouldn’t; that was all.

“The gharryman was flogging his ponies, driving so furiously that people had to jump out of the way to avoid being run over. The streets were thronged, for we had left the European settlement and were on our way through the Javanese and Malay town into the Chinese quarter. Here the gharry drew up in a narrow alley, in front of a tumbledown house. It was a sordid place, a little shop in front, lighted by a tallow candle; the

attached dwelling was an unsavoury hotel—one of those opium-dens, brothels, thieves' kitchens or receivers' stores, such as are run by the worst sort of Chinese in all the big cities of the East.

“The boy knocked at the door. It opened for an inch or two and a tedious parley ensued. Impatiently I, too, jumped out of the gharry, put my shoulder to the door, forced it open—an elderly Chinese woman fled before me with a shriek. I dashed along a passage, the boy after me, to another door. Opening this, I found myself in a dim interior, reeking of brandy and of blood. Someone was groaning. I could make out nothing in the gloom, but I groped my way towards the sound.”

Another pause. When he spoke again, it was with sobs almost as much as with words.

“I groped my way towards the sound—and there she was, lying on a strip of dirty matting, twisted with pain, sighing and groaning. I could not see her face, so dark was the room. Stretching out my hand, I found hers, which was burning hot. She was in a high fever. I shuddered as I realized what had happened. She had come to this foul den in quest of the service I had refused, had sought out a Chinese midwife, hoping in this way to find the secrecy she no longer trusted me to observe. Rather than place herself in my care, she had come to the old witch I had seen in the passage, and had herself mauled by a bungler—because I had behaved like a madman, had so grievously affronted her that she thought it better to take any risks rather than to let me give the aid which, to begin with, I had only been willing to grant on monstrous terms.

“I shouted for light, and that detestable beldame brought a stinking and smoky kerosene lamp. I should have liked to strangle her—but what good would that have done? She put the lamp down on the table; and

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

now, in its yellow glare, I could see the poor, martyred body.

"Then, of a sudden, the fumes were lifted from my brain. No longer half-crazed, I forgot my anger and even for the time forgot the evil mood that had brought us to this pass. Once more I was the doctor, the man of skill and knowledge, to whom there had come an urgent call to use them for the best advantage of a suffering fellow-mortal. I forgot my wretched self and with reawakened intelligence I was ready to do battle with the forces of destruction.

"I passed my hands over the nude body which so recently I had lusted for. Now it had become the body of my patient and was nothing more. I saw in it only the seat of a life at grips with death, only the form of one writhing in torment. Her blood on my hands was not horrible to me, now that I was again the expert upon whose coolness everything turned. I saw, as an expert, the greatness of her danger. . . .

"I saw, indeed, that all was lost, short of a miracle. She had been so mishandled that her life-blood was rapidly draining away. And what was there, in this filthy hovel, which I could make use of in the hope of stanching the flow? Everything I looked at, everything I touched was besoiled. Not even a clean basin and clean water!

"'We must have you removed to hospital instantly,' I said. Thereupon, torture of mind superadded to torture of body, she writhed protestingly.

"'No,' she whispered, 'no, no. I would rather die. No one must know. No one must know. Take me home, home!'

"I understood. Her reputation was more to her than her life. I understood and I obeyed. The boy fetched a litter. We lifted her on to it and then carried her, half-dead, home through the night. Ignoring the terrified

questions and exclamations of the servants, we took her to her room. Then began the struggle; the prolonged and futile struggle with death.

He clutched my arm, so that it was hard not to shout from surprise and pain. His face was so close that I could see the white gleam of teeth and the pale sheen of spectacle-glasses in the starlight. He spoke with such intensity, with such fierce wrath, that his voice assailed me like something betwixt a hiss and a shriek.

“You, a stranger I have never glimpsed in the daylight, you who are (I suppose) touring the world at your ease, do you know what it is to see someone die? Have you ever sat by anyone in the death agony, seen the body twisting in the last wrestle and the blue finger-nails clawing at vacancy; heard the rattle in the throat; watched the inexpressible horror in the eyes of the dying? Have you ever had that terrible experience—you, an idler, a globe-trotter, who can talk so glibly about one’s duty to help?

“I have seen it often enough as a doctor, have studied death as a clinical happening. Once only have I experienced it in the full sense of the term. Once only have I lived with another and died with another. Once only, during that ghastly vigil a few nights ago when I sat cudgelling my brains for some way of stopping the flow of blood, some means of cooling the fever which was consuming her before my eyes, some method of staving off imminent death.

“Do you understand what it is to be a doctor, thoroughly trained in the science and practice of medicine, and (as you sagely remark) one whose first duty is to help—and to sit powerless by the bedside of the dying; knowing, from all one’s knowledge, only one thing—that one can give no help? To feel the pulse as it flickers and fades? My hands were tied! I could not take her to the hospital, where something might have been done to give her a

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

chance. I could not summon aid. I could only sit and watch her die, mumbling meaningless invocations like an old applewoman at church, and next minute clenching my fists in impotent wrath against a non-existent deity.

“Can you understand? Can you understand? What I cannot understand is how one survives such hours, why one does not die with the dying, how one can get up next morning and clean one’s teeth and put on one’s necktie; how one can go on living in the ordinary way after feeling what I had felt, for the first time, that one I would give anything and everything to save was slipping away, some-whither, beyond recall.

“There was an additional torment. As I sat beside the bed (I had given her an injection of morphine to ease the pain and she lay quiet now with cheeks ashen pale), I felt the unceasing tension of a fixed gaze boring into my back. The China boy was sitting cross-legged on the floor, murmuring prayers in his own tongue. Whenever I glanced at him, he raised his eyes imploringly to mine, like a hound dumbly beseeching aid. He lifted his hands as if in supplication to a god—lifted them to me, the impotent weakling who knew that all was vain, that I was of no more use in that room than an insect running across the floor.

“It added to my torture, this petitioning of his, this fanatical conviction that my skill would enable me to save the woman whose life was ebbing as he looked on and prayed. I could have screamed at him and have trampled him under foot, so much did his eager expectancy hurt me; and yet I felt that he and I were bound together by our fondness for the dying woman and by the dread secret we shared.

“Like an animal at watch, he sat huddled up behind me; but the instant I wanted anything he was alert, eager to fetch it, hoping I had thought of something that might help even now. He would have given his own

blood to save her life. I am sure of it. So would I. But what was the use of thinking of transfusion (even if I had had the instruments) when there were no means of arresting the flow of blood? It would only have prolonged her agony. But this China boy would have died for her, as would I. Such was the power she had. And I had not even the power to save her from bleeding to death!

“Towards daybreak she regained consciousness, awoke from the drugged sleep. She opened her eyes, which were no longer proud and cold. The heat of fever glowed in them as she looked round the room. Catching sight of me, she was puzzled for a moment and needed an effort to recall who this stranger was. Then she remembered. She regarded me at first with enmity, waving her arms feebly as if to repel me and showing by her movements that she would have fled from me had she but had the strength. Then, collecting her thoughts, she looked at me more calmly. Her breathing was laboured; she tried to speak; she wanted to sit up, but was too weak. Begging her to desist, I leaned closer to her, so that I should be able to hear her lightest whisper. She regarded me piteously, her lips moved, and faint indeed was the whisper that came from them:

“‘No one will find out? No one?’

“‘No one,’ I responded, with heartful conviction. ‘No one shall ever know.’

“Her eyes were still uneasy. With a great effort she managed to breathe the words:

“‘Swear that no one shall know. Swear it.’

“I raised my hand solemnly and murmured: ‘I pledge you my word.’

“She looked at me, weak though she was, cordially, gratefully. Yes, despite all the harm I had done, she was grateful to me at the last, she smiled her thanks. A little later she tried to speak again, but was not equal

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

to the exertion. Then she lay peacefully, with her eyes closed. Before daylight shone clearly into the room, all was over."

A long silence. He had overcome the frenzy which had prompted him to seize me by the arm and had sunk back exhausted. The stars were paling when three bells struck. A fresh though gentle breeze was blowing as herald of the dawn that comes so quickly in the tropics. Soon I could see him plainly. He had taken off his cap, so that his face was exposed. It was pinched with misery. He scanned me through his spectacles with some interest, to see what sort of a man was this stranger to whom he had been pouring out his heart. Then he went on with his story, speaking with a scornful intonation.

"For her, all was over; but not for me. I was alone with the corpse in a strange house; in a town where (as in all such places) gossip runs like wildfire, and I had pledged my word that her secret should be kept! Consider the situation. Here was a woman moving in the best society of the colony and, to all seeming, in perfect health. She had danced the evening before last at Government House. Now she was dead and the only doctor who knew anything about the matter, the man who had sat by her while she died, was a chance visitor to the town, summoned to her bedside by one of the servants. This doctor and this servant had brought her home in a litter under cover of darkness and had kept everyone else out of the way. Not until morning did they call the other servants to tell them their mistress was dead. The news would be all over the town within an hour or two, and how was I, the doctor from an up-country station, to account for the sudden death, for what I had done and for what I had failed to do? Why hadn't I sent for one of my colleagues to share the responsibility? Why? . . . Why? . . . Why?"

AMOK

"I knew what lay before me. My only helper was the China boy; but he, at any rate, was a devoted assistant, who realized that there was still a fight to be fought.

"I had said to him: 'You understand, don't you? Your mistress's last wish was that no one shall know what has happened.'

"'Savvee plenty, Master,' he answered simply; and I knew that I could trust him.

"He washed the blood stains from the floor, set all to right as quickly as possible, and his fortitude sustained mine.

"Never before have I had so much concentrated energy, nor shall I ever have it again. When one has lost everything but a last remnant, one fights for that last remnant with desperate courage, with fierce resolution. The remnant for which I was fighting was her legacy to me, her secret. I was calm and self-assured in my reception of everyone who came, telling them the tale I had decided upon to account for the death. After all, people are used to sudden, grave, and fatal illness in the tropics; and the laity cannot openly question a doctor's authoritative statements. I explained that the China boy, whom she had sent to fetch the doctor when she was taken ill, had chanced to meet me. But while talking thus to all and sundry with apparent composure, I was awaiting the one man who really mattered, the senior surgeon, who would have to inspect the body before burial could take place. It was Thursday morning and on Saturday the husband was coming back. Speedy burial is the rule in this part of the world; but the senior surgeon, not I, would have to sign the necessary certificates.

"At nine he was announced. I had sent for him, of course. He was my superior in rank and he bore me a grudge because of the local reputation I had acquired in the little matter of the Vice-Resident's broken leg. This

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

was the doctor of whom she had spoken so contemptuously, as good only for bridge. According to official routine my wish for a transfer would pass through his hands. No doubt the Vice-Resident had already mentioned it to him.

"The instant we met that morning, I guessed his enmity, but this only steeled me to my task.

"As soon as I came into the anti-room where he was waiting, he began the attack:

"'When did Madame Blank die?'

"'At six this morning.'

"'When did she send for you?'

"'At nightfall yesterday.'

"'Did you know that I was her regular professional attendant?'

"'Yes.'

"'Why didn't you send for me, then?'

"'There wasn't time—and, besides, Madame Blank had put herself in my hands exclusively. In fact, she expressly forbade me to call in any other doctor.'

"He stared at me. His face flushed. Suppressing an angry retort, he said with assumed indifference:

"'Well, even though you could get on without me so long as she was alive, you have fulfilled your official duty in sending for me now, and I must fulfil mine by verifying the death and ascertaining the cause.'

"I made no answer, and let him lead the way to the death-chamber. As soon as we were there and before he could touch the body, I said:

"'It is not a question of ascertaining the cause of death, but of inventing a cause. Madame Blank sent for me to save her, if I could, from the consequences of an abortion, clumsily performed by a Chinese mid-wife. To save her life was impossible, but I pledged my word to save her reputation. I want you to help me.'

"He looked his surprise.

"You actually want me, the senior surgeon of this province, to join you in concealing a crime?"

"Yes, that is what I want you to do."

"In fact," he said with a sneer, "I am to help in the hushing-up of a crime you have committed."

"I have given you to understand that, as far as Madame Blank is concerned, all I have done is to try to save her from the consequences of her own indiscretion and someone else's crime (if you want to insist on the word). Had I been the culprit, I should not be alive at this hour. She has herself paid the extreme penalty, and the miserable bungler who procured the abortion really does not matter one way or the other. You cannot punish the criminal without tarnishing the dead woman's reputation, and that I will not suffer."

"You will not suffer it? You talk to me as if you were my official chief, instead of my being yours. You dare to order me about. I had already surmised there must be something queer when you were summoned from your nook in the backwoods. A fine beginning you've made of it with your attempt to interlope here. Well, all that remains for me is to make my own investigation, and I can assure you that I shall report exactly what I find. I'm not going to put my name to a false certificate; you needn't think so!"

"I was imperturbable.

"You'll have to, this once. If you don't, you'll never leave the room alive."

"I put my hand in my pocket. The pistol was not there (I had left it in my room at the hotel), but the bluff worked. He drew back in alarm; whereupon I made a step forward and said, with a calculated mingling of threat and conciliation:

"Look here! I shall be sorry to go to extremes, but you'd better understand that I don't value either my life or yours at a single stiver. I'm so far through that there's

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

only one thing in the world left for me to care about, and that's the keeping of my promise to this dead woman that the manner of her death shall remain secret. I give you my word that if you sign a certificate to the effect that she died of—what shall we say?—a sudden access of malignant tropical fever with hyperpyrexia, leading to heart failure—that will sound plausible enough—if you do this, I will leave the Indies within a week. I will, if you like, put a bullet through my head as soon as she is buried and I can be sure that no one (understand, no one) can make any further examination. That should satisfy you. In fact, it must satisfy you.'

"My voice, my whole aspect, must have been menacing, for he was cowed. Whenever I advanced a little he retreated, showing that uncontrollable fear with which people flee from a man brandishing a blood-stained kris, a man who is running amuck. He wilted visibly and changed his tone. He was no longer the adamantine official, standing invincibly upon punctilio.

"Still, with a last vestige of resistance, he murmured:

"Never in my life have I signed a false certificate. Perhaps there would be no question raised if I were to word the document as you suggest. It is perfectly clear to me, however, that I ought not to do anything of the kind."

"Of course you "ought not," judging by conventional standards,' I rejoined, wishing to help him to save his face. 'But this is a special case. When you know that the disclosure of the truth can only bring grievous suffering to a living man and blast the reputation of a dead woman, why hesitate?'

"He nodded. We sat down together at the table. Amicable enough now to all seeming, we concocted the certificate which was the basis of the account of the matter published in next day's newspaper. Then he stood up and looked at me searchingly:

AMOK

“ ‘You’ll sail for Europe by the next boat, won’t you?’

“ ‘Of course! I’ve pledged you my word.’

“He continued to stare at me. I saw that he wanted to be strict and businesslike and that the task was hard. It was as much in the endeavour to hide his embarrassment as from any wish to convey information that he said:

“ ‘Blank was going home with his wife immediately after his arrival from Yokohama. I expect the poor fellow will want to take his wife’s body back to her people in England. He’s a wealthy man, you know, and the rich can indulge these fancies. I shall order the coffin instantly, and have it lined with sheet lead so that it can be sealed. That will get over immediate difficulties and he will know that in this sweltering heat there was no possibility of awaiting his appearance on the scene. Even if he thinks we’ve been precipitate, he won’t venture to say so. We’re officials and he’s only a merchant after all, though he could buy us both up and never miss the money. Besides, we’re acting as we do to save him needless pain.’

“My enemy of a few minutes was now my acknowledged confederate. Well, he knew he was soon going to be rid of me for ever; and he had to justify himself to himself. But what he did next was utterly unexpected. He shook me warmly by the hand!

“ ‘I hope you’ll soon be all right again,’ he said.

“What on earth did he mean? Was I ill? Was I mad? I opened the door for him ceremoniously and bade him farewell. Therewith my energies ran down. The room swam round me and I collapsed beside her bed as the frenzied Malay collapses when he has run his murderous course and is at last shot down.

“I don’t know how long I lay on the floor. At length there was a rustling noise, a movement in the room. I

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

looked up. There stood the China boy, regarding me uneasily.

“ ‘Someone have come. Wanchee see Missis,’ he said.

“ ‘You mustn’t let anyone in.’

“ ‘But, Master . . .’

‘He hesitated, looked at me timidly, and tried in vain to speak. The poor wretch was obviously suffering.

“ ‘Who is it?’

“ He trembled like a dog in fear of a blow. He did not utter any name. A sense of delicacy rare in a native servant restrained him. He said simply:

“ ‘B’long that man!’

“ He did not need to be explicit. I knew instantly whom he meant. At the word I was all eagerness to see this unknown, whose very existence I had forgotten. For, strange as it may seem to you, after the first disclosure she had made to me and her rejection of my infamous proposal, I had completely put him out of my mind. Amid the hurry and anxiety and stress of what had happened since, it had actually slipped my memory that there was another man concerned in the affair, the man this woman had loved, the man to whom she had passionately given what she had refused to give me. The day before, I should have hated him, should have longed to tear him to pieces. Now I was eager to see him because I loved him—yes, loved the man whom she had loved.

“ With a bound I was in the ante-room. A young, very young, fair-haired officer was standing there, awkward and shy. He was pale and slender, looking little more than a boy and yet touchingly anxious to appear man-like, calm and composed. His hand was trembling as he raised it in salute. I could have put my arms round him and hugged him, so perfectly did he fulfil my ideal of the man I should have wished to be this woman’s lover—not a self-confident seducer, but a tender stripling to whom she had thought fit to give herself.

“He stood before me, abashed. My sudden apparition, my eager scrutiny, increased his embarrassment. His face puckered slightly and it was plain that he was on the verge of tears.

“‘I don’t want to push in,’ he said at length, ‘but I should like so much to see Madame Blank once more.’

“Scarcely aware of what I was doing, I put an arm round the young fellow’s shoulders and guided him towards the door. He looked at me with astonishment but with gratitude as well. At this instant we had an indubitable sense of fellowship. We went together to the bedside. She lay there; all but the head, shoulders and arms hidden by the white linen. Feeling that my closeness must be distasteful to him, I withdrew to a distance. Suddenly he collapsed, as I had done; sank to his knees and, no longer ashamed to show his emotions, burst into tears.

“What could I say? Nothing!

“What could I do? I raised him to his feet and led him to the sofa. There we sat side by side; and, to soothe him, I gently stroked his soft, blond hair. He took my hand in his and pressed it affectionately. Then he said:

“‘Tell me the whole truth, Doctor. She didn’t kill herself, did she?’

“‘No,’ I answered.

“‘Then is anyone else to blame for her death?’

“‘No,’ I said once more, although from within was welling up the answer: ‘I, I, I—and you. The two of us. We are to blame. We two—and her unhappy pride.’

“But I kept the words unuttered, and was content to say yet again:

“‘No! No one was to blame. It was her doom.’

“‘I can’t realize it,’ he groaned. ‘It seems incredible. The night before last she was at the ball; she nodded to me and smiled. How could it happen? How did she come to die so unexpectedly, so swiftly?’

"I told him a string of falsehoods. Even from her lover I must keep the secret. We spent that day and the next and the next together in brotherly converse, both aware (though we did not give the knowledge voice) that our lives were intertwined by our relationship to the dead woman. Again and again I found it hard to keep my own counsel, but I did so. He never learned that she had been with child by him; that she had come to me to have the fruit of their love destroyed; and that, after my refusal, she had taken the step which had ended her own life as well. Yet we talked of nothing but her during those days when I was hidden in his quarters. I had forgotten to tell you that! They were searching for me. Her husband had arrived after the coffin had been closed. He was suspicious—all sorts of rumours were afoot—and he wanted my account of the matter at first hand. But I simply couldn't endure the thought of meeting him, the man through whom I knew she had suffered; so I hid myself and during those four days I never left the house. Her lover took a passage for me under a false name, and late at night I went on board the boat bound for Singapore. I left everything, all my possessions, the work I had done in the last seven years. My house stood open to anyone who chose to enter it. No doubt the authorities have already erased my name from the list of their officials as 'absent without leave.' But I could not go on living in that house, that town, that world, where everything reminded me of her. If I fled like a thief in the night it was to escape her, to forget her.

"Vain was the attempt! When I came on board at midnight, my friend with me to see me off, a great, oblong, brass-bound chest was being hoisted on board by the crane. It was her coffin, her coffin! It had followed me, just as I had followed her down from the hills to the coast. I could make no sign, I had to look on unheeding, for her husband was there too. He was on his way to

England. Perhaps he means to have the coffin opened when he gets there; to have a post-mortem made; to find out. . . . Anyhow, he has taken her back to him, has snatched her away from us; she belongs to him now, not to us. At Singapore, where I transhipped to this German mail-boat, the coffin was transhipped as well; and he is here too, her husband. But I am still watching over her and shall watch over her to the end. He shall never learn her secret. I shall defend her to the last against the man to escape whom she went to her death. He shall learn nothing, nothing. Her secret belongs to me and to no one else in the world.

“Do you understand? Do you understand why I keep out of the other passengers’ way, why I cannot bear to hear them laugh and chatter, to watch their foolish flirtations—When I know that deep down in the hold, among the tea-chests and the cases of Brazil nuts, her body lies? I can’t get near it, for the hatches are closed; but I feel its nearness by day and by night, when the passengers are tramping up and down the promenade deck or dancing merrily in the saloon. It is stupid of me, I know. The sea ebbs and flows above millions of corpses and the dead are rotting beneath every spot where one sets foot on land. All the same, I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it when they dance and laugh in this ship which is taking her body home. I know what she expects of me. There is still something left for me to do. Her secret is not yet safe; and, until it is safe, my pledge to her will be unfulfilled.”

From midships there came splashing and scraping noises. The sailors were swabbing the decks. He started at the sound and jumped to his feet.

“I must be going,” he murmured.

He was a distressing sight, with his careworn expression and his eyes reddened by weeping and by drink. He had

suddenly become distant in his manner. Obviously he was regretting his loquacity, was ashamed of himself for having opened his heart to me as he had done. Wishing to be friendly, however, I said :

“Won’t you let me pay you a visit in your cabin this afternoon?”

A smile—mocking, harsh, cynical—twisted his lips; and when he answered, after a momentary hesitation, it was with appropriate emphasis.

“Ah, yes, ‘it’s one’s duty to help.’ That’s your favourite maxim, isn’t it? Your use of it a few hours ago, when you caught me in a weak moment, has loosened my tongue finely! Thank you for your good intentions, but I’d rather be left to myself. Don’t imagine, either, that I feel any better for having turned myself inside out before you and for having shown you my very entrails. My life has been torn to shreds and no one can patch it together again. I have gained nothing by working in the Dutch colonial service for seven years. My pension has gone phut and I am returning to Germany a pauper—like a dog that slinks behind a coffin. A man cannot run amuck without paying for it. In the end, he is shot down ; and I hope that for me the end will come soon. I’m obliged to you for proposing to call, but I’ve the best of companions to prevent my feeling lonely in my cabin—plenty of bottles of excellent whisky. They’re a great consolation. Then there’s another old friend and my only regret is that I didn’t make use of it soon instead of late. My automatic, I mean, which will in the end be better for my soul than any amount of open confession. So I won’t trouble you to call, if you don’t mind. Among the ‘rights of man’ there is a right which no one can take away, the right to croak when and where and how one pleases, without a ‘helping hand.’ ”

He looked at me scornfully and with a challenging air, but I knew that at bottom his feeling was one of shame,

infinite shame. Saying no word of farewell, he turned on his heel, and slouched off in the direction of the cabins. I never saw him again, though I visited the fore-deck several times after midnight. So completely did he vanish that I might have thought myself the victim of hallucination had I not noticed among the other passengers a man wearing a crape armlet, a Dutchman, I was told, whose wife had recently died of tropical fever. He walked apart, holding converse with no one, and was melancholy of mien. Watching him, I was distressed by the feeling that I was aware of his secret trouble. When my path crossed his, I turned my face away, lest he should divine from my expression that I knew more about his fate than he did himself.

In Naples harbour occurred the accident which was explicable to me in the light of the stranger's tale. Most of the passengers were, as I have said, ashore at the time. I had been to the opera and had then supped in one of the brightly lit cafés in the Via Roma. As I was being rowed back to the steamer, I noticed that there was a commotion going on round the gangway, boats moving to and fro and men in them holding torches and acetylene lamps as they scanned the water. On deck there were several carabinieri, talking in low tones. I asked one of the deck-hands what was the matter. He answered evasively, so that it was obvious he had been told to be discreet. Next morning, too, when we were steaming towards Genoa, I found it impossible to glean any information. But at Genoa, in an Italian newspaper, I read a high-flown account of what had happened that night at Naples.

Under cover of darkness, it appeared, to avoid disquieting the passengers, a coffin from the Dutch Indies was being lowered into a boat. It contained the body of a lady; and her husband (who was taking it home for

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

burial) was already waiting in the boat. Something heavy had, when the coffin was half-way down the ship's side, dropped on it from the upper deck, carrying it away, so that it fell with a crash into the boat, which instantly capsized. The coffin, being lined with lead, sank. Fortunately there had been no loss of life, for no one had been struck by the falling coffin, and the widower, together with the other persons in the boat, had been rescued, though not without difficulty.

What had caused the accident? One story, said the reporter, was that a lunatic had jumped overboard and in his fall had wrenched the coffin from its lashings. Perhaps the story of the falling body had been invented to cover up the remissness of those responsible for lowering the coffin, who had used tackle that was too weak, so that the lead-weighted box had broken away of itself. Anyhow, the officers were extremely reticent.

In another part of the paper was a brief notice to the effect that the body of an unknown man, apparently about thirty-five years of age, had been picked up in Naples harbour. There was a bullet-wound in the head. No one connected this with the accident which occurred when the coffin was being lowered.

Before my own eyes, however, as I read the brief paragraphs, there loomed from the printed page the ghostly countenance of the unhappy man whose story I have here set down.

THE BURNING SECRET



A PARTNER

THE engine gave a hoarse shriek as the express drew up at Semmering station. A moment of silence followed, during which the carriages rested in the translucent mountain air. The train belched forth a traveller or two, and swallowed down a couple of fresh arrivals. Peppery exclamations shuttlecocked to and fro. Again the locomotive uttered a raucous cry as it started off, dragging a dark serpent behind it, to disappear into the tunnel's maw. A healing peace once more pervaded the landscape, and the windswept atmosphere was good to breathe.

One of the men who had stepped out of the train was young, and of agreeable aspect. He was stylishly dressed and debonair, with an elasticity of gait which brought him to the cabstand well in advance of the other passengers. He engaged the solitary vehicle, and was conveyed without haste to the hotel he had selected. Spring was in the air. A few white clouds, glinting and glowing in the sky, such clouds as are seen only in the months of May and June, seemed to be playing at catch-as-catch-can in the blue, only to hide themselves from the observer's eye behind the scaling mountains, there to embrace and flee, to wave a lily-white hand, as it were, then to melt away into nothingness, reappear, and finally to settle down as night-caps on the neighbouring hills.

A restless, insurgent wind rustled among the lean and

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

rain-drenched trees, so that their limbs groaned, and thousands of water-drops were scattered on the ground. Chill currents of snow-laden air descended from the peaks, until one caught one's breath in the keen, sharp atmosphere. The heavens and the earth were both in a yeasty ferment of impatience. The cab rattled along to the accompaniment of the leisurely trot of the horses and the silvery tinkle of the bells with which the harness was adorned.

On arriving at the hotel the young man's first move was to consult the list of guests. Not a name that he knew was to be found!

"What the devil have I come here for?" he communed. "No office could be worse than this lonesome place with not a soul for company. Obviously I am too early in the season—or too late. My vacations never seem to strike it lucky. Not a creature of my acquaintance among the whole bally lot of them. At least one or two women might have graced the list, so that I could have whiled away my one short week in a mild flirtation."

The youth, a scion of the minor Austrian nobility and employed in the Treasury, had decided to give himself this week's holiday, not because he was in need of a rest but because his colleagues were off on a jaunt and he did not see why he should not follow their example. Though by no means lacking in philosophical capacity, Baron Otto von Sternfeldt was essentially of a sociable disposition, and was popular in the circles he frequented. He found solitude irksome, soon tired of his own company, and avoided every occasion for being alone since he felt scant inclination to get to know himself better. If his talents were to flourish, the warmth of his heart to glow into a flame, and his natural high spirits to find vent, he needed constantly to rub shoulders with men and women. By himself he felt cold and lifeless, like a match unlighted in a box.

THE BURNING SECRET

He now wandered aimlessly about in the empty lounge, disconsolately fingering the papers and magazines; then he tried the music-room and strummed a waltz on the piano, but his fingers were stiff and clumsy, refusing to impart the necessary swing and rhythm to the tune. Utterly depressed, he threw himself into an easy-chair, and stared out of the window. The evening was drawing in, and grey mist-wreaths lurked among the pines. For a full hour, he remained drearily watching the gathering shadows. Then he decided to go into the dining-room.

Very few tables were laid; and he cast a hasty glance at the persons sitting over their meal. Not a friend or an acquaintance to be seen! Ah, yes, over there was a face he knew—but it was merely that of a professional trainer, to whom he gave a nod. Women there were none; not a sign of anything worth the attention of a charming young gentleman on pleasure bent. His vexation swelled into impatience.

Sternfeldt belonged to the category of those whose face is a fortune; one took a liking to him at first sight. He was always eager for new experiences, fresh adventures; he was never taken off his guard, because he kept perpetually on the alert to seize the skirts of happy chance; Cupid stood ready at his elbow to give him a hint at the first approach of amorous possibilities; he looked at every woman, be she the wife of a friend or the chamber-maid who opened his bedroom door for him, with a searching eye which seemed to unclothe her. It is customary to call such men “women hunters,” and there is much penetrating wisdom in the appellation, for they actually do possess many of the instincts of the huntsman, passionately stalking their prey, enjoying the excitement of bringing the quarry to bay, and revelling in the spiritual cruelty of the kill. They are perpetually ambushed for the spring, and refuse to give up the chase

until the game is theirs. Passion swamps their whole being; not the passion of a lover, but the passion of a gambler, which is cool, calculating, and dangerous. Some continue thus their whole life long, persistent adventurers in the field of "love," persons whose days are divided into countless petty and lustful episodes—a significant glance in passing, a suggestive smile, a touch of the knee to a neighbour at table—and the year is made up of hundreds of such days wherein sensuality is the main ingredient.

That evening, the baron found no one to take a hand in his favourite sport; and there is nothing so exasperating to the temper of a gamester as to sit with the cards in his hand awaiting the arrival of a partner. Otto asked the waiter to bring him a newspaper. His eyes ran down the columns and over the headlines; but his mind was elsewhere, and he read as though his senses were benumbed by drink.

Then a skirt rustled behind him, and he heard a clear voice say somewhat irritably and with an affectation of culture:

"*Mais tais-toi donc, Edgar!*"

A tall, finely built woman in a silk dress passed, followed by a boy with a pale face and eyes filled with vague curiosity which seemed to caress his companion's form. The couple sat down at a table reserved for them. Edgar was obviously on his best behaviour, and yet the restlessness in his dark eyes betrayed his real feelings. The lady—and she it was who absorbed the whole of the baron's interest—was well groomed and dressed with taste. She was a type that the young man admired, being a not too buxom Jewess just past the prime but not as yet blowzy, a woman still capable of passion, though keeping her natural sensuousness veiled behind an outward decorum. At first he was denied a look into her eyes, for she kept the lids resolutely lowered; but he

THE BURNING SECRET

could contemplate at leisure the arch of her brows meeting delicately over her finely chiselled nose, which, though it betrayed her race, gave a noble grace to a clear-cut and interesting profile. Her hair was as abundant and feminine as the other charms of the flesh, and swept in opulent waves over her head. She possessed the assurance of a woman whose beauty has been the open delight of everyone with whom she has come in contact. Her voice was soft and low as she gave her orders to the waiter, and told her son, who was fiddling with his spoon and fork, to remember his manners and to sit still. Seemingly indifferent to what was going on around her, she appeared to ignore the baron's cautious scrutiny —though in reality her masked interest in him had been awakened by the fact that he was frankly interested in her.

The cloud upon the young man's spirit had dispersed, and his face was serene. Lines and wrinkles of annoyance were smoothed away, his muscles became taut, the blood flooded his skin and gave it renewed life, his eyes sparkled. Having many a feminine attribute in his nature, he responded to the presence of an attractive woman, as a woman responds to the presence of a man. Sensuous pleasure stretched his energies to the full. The hunter scented the game. His eyes challenged hers to the tourney. But she, though giving him a furtive glance, refused to look him in the face and thus to pick up the gauntlet. It seemed to him, however, that a hint of a smile might be detected flitting around the corners of her mouth. He could not be sure, and this excited him the more. What contented him was the fact that she deliberately avoided his eyes. A good sign, he thought, for it might be interpreted as defiance and at the same time as embarrassment. Besides, her preoccupation with the child was too meticulous, and must undoubtedly be aimed at the onlooker. Nor was her conversation with

the lad quite natural; she seemed, rather, to be talking at her observant neighbour. The forced repose of her manner was, Otto felt, the mark of an initial uneasiness.

His feelings were roused. The hunt was on. He lingered over his meal, staring at the woman incessantly during a full hour until at length he could have drawn every curve of her face, while his eyes had secretly caressed each nook and fold of her splendid body. A heavy shroud of darkness had fallen over the countryside, blotting out the forest whose trees continued to sob as though they were frightened children, for the rain-clouds were stretching eager fingers towards them, grey and full of menace. Shadows had gathered in the corners of the room, and an oppressive silence hung like a pall upon the groups clustered round the dining-tables. Sternfeldt noticed that the lady's chatter with her son became more and more forced under the burden of this silence, became more and more artificial and soon would have to cease. A test occurred to his mind. He got up, and, walking very slowly, with his eyes glued on the window, he passed close to her without giving her a glance, and disappeared through the doorway. Suddenly he reappeared as if he had forgotten something and had come back to fetch it. She was caught in the trap, for he found that she had been gazing with lively interest at his retreating figure.

Baron Otto von Sternfeldt was enchanted at the success of his ruse, and waited patiently in the entrance-hall. She soon came out of the dining-room holding her boy by the hand, fluttering the pages of some magazines as she passed the big hall table, and showed a few of the illustrations to the little boy. As if by chance, the baron too, approached the table, pretending he wanted to read a paper but in reality that he might get another glimpse into those lustrous eyes, perhaps, even, say a word or two. . . . However, the woman turned abruptly away,

THE BURNING SECRET

not deigning to give him so much as a glance. She tapped her son lightly on the shoulder, saying with affectionate decision.

“Viens, Edgar. Au lit!”

A trifle crestfallen, Otto stared after her. He had fully expected to make acquaintance that very night. The postponement was a disappointment. And yet, it must be agreed, the situation was not lacking in charm. A zest had been added to the adventure. The incident goaded him to enhanced desire. He had to admit that a partner had come his way, and he could now play his hand.

FRIENDSHIP

When the baron stepped into the hall next morning, he saw the boy engaged in conversation with the two lift attendants who were showing him the pictures in one of Karl May's juvenile books. Since his mother was not present, it might be inferred that she was still engrossed in the cares of her person. For the first time, Sternfeldt took conscious notice of the child, who appeared to be about twelve years old, under-developed, shy, nervous, jerky in his movements, and possessed of a pair of dark, roving eyes. Like so many youngsters of his age, he gave the impression of being scared, as if he had suddenly been roused from sleep and placed in unfamiliar surroundings. He was by no means plain, but his face was still undifferentiated; the struggle between the man that was to be and the child that had been was hardly begun; his features were moulded but not finally set; there was no clear line, no striking silhouette, only a pale and somewhat uncouth mass. In addition, being at the awkward age, his clothes did not seem to belong to him; his thin arms and frail legs were lost in the folds of jacket and trousers; he lacked interest in his appearance.

The lad created a very poor impression. He was constantly getting in the way. At one moment it was the hall-porter who pushed him aside; at another he would be mixed up in the revolving door. The outer world was unfriendly. But he tried to compensate for this by futile and incessant chatter with the hotel servants. When they had time they would endeavour to answer his numerous questions, but would break off as soon as possible and go about their business. The baron contemplated the boy, a compassionate smile curling his lips. Poor child, he examined everything with curiosity, only to be fobbed off with roughness. If another human eye caught his inquisitive look, he would cringe away, unhappy at being observed, miserable that he had been detected in the act of investigating. Sternfeldt was amused; he began to feel his interest waxing. Then a thought struck him: why not make friends with the lad and utilize this friendship in order to get acquainted with the mother? It was only fear that made the youngster so shy. Well, a fellow could try. Unobtrusively he followed Edgar, who had gone outside and was stroking the soft nose of a cab-horse. Ill-luck dogged him even in this innocent pastime, for the cabby unceremoniously ordered him to leave the beast alone. Ruffled and bored, Edgar was again reduced to standing about with his vacant expression of countenance, not knowing what next to be at.

The baron seized his chance, and said in a jovial voice:

“Well, young man, how do you like this place?”

The boy flushed, and looked up anxiously. He rubbed his hands on the seat of his trousers in his embarrassment. This was his first experience of a gentleman opening conversation with him.

“Very much, thank you,” he answered awkwardly, gulping down the last two words.

THE BURNING SECRET

"You surprise me. I should say it was a rotten hole, especially for a young man such as you. What on earth can you find to do all day?"

The boy was still too flustered to find a speedy response. How was it possible that this stranger should take notice of a small boy about whom nobody ever bothered? He felt immensely shy and immensely proud likewise of what was happening to him. With an effort he pulled himself together.

"I like reading, and we go for walks. Sometimes we hire a carriage for a drive. I've been ill, and Mother brought me here for my health. The doctor said I was to sit about a lot in the sun."

As he spoke, an accent of self-confidence came into his voice. Children are invariably proud of their illnesses, for they guess that the danger makes them doubly important to their relatives.

"Yes, the sun is most beneficial for a young gentleman in your state of health. You ought to burn to a fine brown. But it's not good to be sitting about all day. A big boy like you would do better to go for rambles on his own, to be a bit uppish, and to play all kinds of pranks. It seems to me you are too obedient and well behaved. You look like a regular bookworm, always going about with a ponderous tome tucked under your arm. When I think of the young scamp I was at your age . . . Why, d'you know, every evening I came home with torn breeches; a terrible pickle I was in. No use for a man to be too good."

In spite of himself Edgar smiled, and on the instant his shyness vanished. He would have loved to respond to the baron's advances, but was afraid of appearing cheeky. How friendly this smartly tailored gentleman was! It was splendid to be talking on equal terms with him. The boy's pleasure in the encounter tied his tongue for very happiness. What would he not have given to find suitable

words to continue the conversation! But his thoughts were in a whirl. As luck would have it, the hotel manager's Saint Bernard loped by at this crucial moment. Then it stopped still, came to sniff both boy and man, allowed itself to be patted and fondled.

"D'you like dogs?" the baron inquired abruptly.

"Very much. Grandma has one at her place in Baden, and when we go there on a visit he spends the whole day with me. It's topping. But we're only there in summer."

"I've a couple of dozen dogs on my estate, and maybe I'll give you one, a brown chap with white ears, little more than a puppy, but well trained. How'd you like that?"

The lad blushed with delight.

"Fine!" he exclaimed spontaneously. But then a revulsion of feeling overtook him, and he stuttered bashfully: "But Mother will never agree. She hates dogs about the house, they make so much work."

The baron chuckled, well pleased, for he had at length guided the talk on to the lady who interested him.

"Is your mother very strict?"

Edgar reflected for a moment, looked up at his new friend questioningly as if to see whether the stranger could be trusted, and then answered cautiously:

"No, can't exactly say she's strict. She lets me do anything I like just now because I've been ill. Perhaps she'd let me have a dog . . ."

"Shall I put in a good word for you?"

"Oh, golly!" cried the boy delightedly. "She'd be sure to agree. What's the dog like? White ears, did you say? Can he beg and retrieve?"

"He can do any and every trick you can think of."

It was tickling to Otto's vanity to watch the spark he had kindled in the youngster's eyes. All trace of shyness disappeared; and the child's spontaneity, no longer crippled by anxiety and fear, bubbled up like a spring of

THE BURNING SECRET

fresh water. The awkward boy had been replaced by a natural and exuberant creature. If only the mother could prove similar to her son, thought the baron. A score of questions were showered upon him at this instant by the youth.

“What’s it called?”

“Caro.”

“Caro! Caro!”

Edgar seemed to revel in the word, and to be intoxicated with delight at having acquired a friend so unexpectedly. The baron himself was no little surprised at his easy conquest, and decided to strike while the iron was hot. He invited Edgar to go for a stroll, and the lad, who for weeks had hungered after companionship, was in the seventh heaven of delight. He gave free rein to his tongue, responding innocently to his new friend’s subtle questions and assumed interest. It was not long before the baron knew all he needed concerning the family: that Edgar was the only son of a Viennese lawyer belonging to the well-to-do Jewish stratum. Plying the boy with adroit questions, he further learned that the mother was not particularly pleased with their stay in Semmering, that she had grumbled at the lack of society. Moreover, it would appear from the evasive answers given by Edgar that Mother was not particularly fond of Father, so that Sternfeldt surmised the situation to a nicety. He felt almost ashamed of himself for extracting these scraps of information thus easily from his decoy who, unused to finding anyone interested in what he had to say, allowed himself to be inveigled into confidence after confidence. Edgar’s youthful heart beat quick with pride, especially when, in the course of the walk, the baron took his arm affectionately. It was an infinite delight for the child to be seen in such company. Soon he forgot his juvenility, and prattled disingenuously as to an equal. His conversation proved him to be

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

a bright lad, somewhat precocious intellectually as is usual with sickly children who pass a large part of their time among elders, and prone to like or to dislike persons and things to excess. He seemed, so far as his emotional life was concerned, to be unbalanced, feeling either hatred towards or passionate love for objects and individuals. The golden mean did not exist for him, and his tender face would at times become contorted with the excess of his emotions. There was something wild and resilient in his mode of expression which coloured his words with fanatical ardour, and his gawkiness might possibly be explained as an outcome of a painfully repressed anxiety at the violence of his own passions.

The baron soon won Edgar's confidence. In half an hour he held the child's warm and palpitating heart in his hand. Children are so easily hoaxed, for grown-ups seldom try to ingratiate themselves and when they do they catch the innocents unawares. Sternfeldt merely had to think himself back into his own boyhood, and the puerile conversation immediately seemed the most natural in the world. Edgar, for his part, had by now quite accepted the elder man as a chum, and very soon lost any sense of inferiority. All he was aware of was that he had found a friend—and what a friend! His relatives and friends in Vienna were forgotten, his pals with their squeaky voices, their idiotic chatter, might never have existed! They were submerged beneath this new and unprecedented experience. He had become an intimate of the stranger, his wonderful friend; and he swelled with pride when, at parting, he was invited to a further ramble on the morrow. They separated as brothers; and this farewell was, perhaps, the most glorious of Edgar's life. Children are so easily hoaxed. . . .

Baron Otto von Sternfeldt grinned as Edgar ran off. An intermediary had been found. The boy would doubtless regale his mother to satiety with every word, every

THE BURNING SECRET

gesture, of this amazing rencounter. The woman-hunter preened himself upon the subtle compliments he had conveyed through the son to the mother. He had invariably spoken of her as "your lovely mother"—Edgar would do what was necessary; he, the baron, need make no further advances. The charming unknown would come to him. . . . Not requisite to lift a finger . . . The baron could muse over the landscape from morning to night, from night till morning. . . . A child's warm hands . . . he knew . . . were building a bridge between his heart and the heart of the woman he coveted. . . .

TRIO

As was clearly demonstrated a few hours later, the baron's plan proved highly successful. Intentionally he came rather late to luncheon; and the boy, who was already seated at table, sprang up to greet his new friend with enthusiasm. He plucked his mother's sleeve, whispered a few words in her ear, and drew her attention to the baron with hands and eyes. The lady reproved him for his unseemly behaviour, blushing the while and evidently put out of countenance. Yet she could not help glancing in the young gentleman's direction, and this gave her suitor an opportunity. He bowed respectfully—henceforward they "knew" one another, the necessary introduction had been made. She, in her turn, felt obliged to recognize his civility with a gracious nod, but for the remainder of the meal she kept her eyes glued to her plate. With Edgar it was otherwise. He was constantly spying in the baron's direction, and once even went so far as to address his newly-found friend—for which piece of effrontery his mother reproved him smartly. So soon as luncheon was over, he was ordered to go upstairs and lie down. Edgar begged and prayed

to be let off. In the end his mother permitted him to take leave of the baron. The latter spoke a few pleasant words to the lad, and Edgar's eyes glistened with joy. Then, with a nonchalant air, the young man stood up, turned towards the neighbouring table, and, addressing the lady, complimented her upon having so intelligent and jolly a little chap as son, and referred to the pleasant morning he and Edgar had passed in one another's company. Meanwhile the boy stood by, blushing with delight. The baron plied the lady with questions concerning Edgar's health, so that in the end she was compelled to reply. Gradually, as the barriers were broken down, the two elders engaged in a lengthy conversation to which the boy listened entranced. Then Sternfeldt introduced himself formally, mentioning his name and title—to which, it would seem, the lady was not wholly indifferent. Take it all in all, she was most gracious in her manner towards her new acquaintance. Nevertheless, she soon moved to withdraw, excusing herself from further conversation because of her son's delicate health.

The boy entered a lively protest, saying that he was not in the least tired, and was quite prepared to sit up throughout the afternoon and far into the night. But his mother had already proffered her hand to the baron who deferentially bent his head over it and kissed it gallantly.

That night Edgar slept badly. His brain was in a whirl of ecstasy and despair. Something new had suddenly entered his life. For the first time in his experience he had participated in the destinies of fully grown persons. As he swayed between sleep and waking he forgot his own childhood and deemed himself an adult. So far, his existence had not been a particularly happy one, since he was an only child and his health was constantly giving trouble. His parents had been the only target for his affections, and they paid little heed to him.

THE BURNING SECRET

The boy's other companions were the household servants. Thus his feelings had been pent up to bursting-point, and at the first chance were likely to overwhelm the object which seemed worthy of a great love. Edgar lay in the dark, happy but puzzled, wishing to laugh aloud and finding the tears streaming down his face. He loved his new friend more deeply than father, mother, or even God Almighty. An intense and passionate longing went up from his heart, and wove a glamour around the image of this fascinating companion.

"I'm certainly not worthy of his friendship," he thought. "A kid like me, barely twelve, all my school-days before me, sent off to bed long before anyone else thinks of going . . . What can I ever be to him? What have I to offer him? . . ."

This torturing sense of inability to show his friend what he felt made Edgar miserable. Before, when he had chummed up with a schoolfellow, he had always been able to show his liking by the gift of a stamp from his album, or some other object dear to a youthful heart. But now things of the sort seemed idiotic, utterly valueless. How could he present such paltry tokens of affections to his new friend? What means could he employ to show his regard? He was tormented by the recognition of his immaturity. How rotten to be nothing more than a kid of twelve! Never had he so yearned to be grown up, to be big and strong, to be a real man.

These uneasy musings were interwoven with premonitions of an awakening manhood, rosy dreams which passed gradually into the realm of sleep. But even as he slept, a contented smile played about his lips. . . . Tomorrow he would see his friend again. . . . Had they not fixed it up for a walk together? . . .

At seven he awoke with a start. Had he overslept himself? Quickly he got into his clothes, and ran to bid his mother the customary good morning. She was amazed

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

to find him up so early. Usually it was all she could do to drag him out of his bed and get him washed and dressed in time for breakfast.

Before she could question him as to his unwonted behaviour, he had already bolted from the room. Forgetting all about breakfast, Edgar prowled up and down the lounge till nine eagerly watching the lift, determined not to miss his friend and the promised walk. . . .

At last, a little before ten, Baron Otto von Sternfeldt strolled unconcernedly into the hall. The tryst had long since escaped his memory. But when the boy rushed up to him and passionately recalled the previous day's promise, the baron proved affable, and cordially entered into Edgar's plan, smiling the while at so excessive a demonstration of friendliness. Linking his arm in that of his companion, he sauntered to and fro, quietly but firmly refusing to quit the hall immediately. He seemed to be waiting for someone, and scanned both lift and doors attentively. Of a sudden he stiffened. Edgar's mother sailed towards the twain with a smile of greeting. She fell in with the idea of a walk, and the three set out together.

This was far from being the treat Edgar had expected. He had reckoned upon a *tête-à-tête*, and was sorely disappointed. Biting his lips, the boy slouched sulkily in their wake. The promised walk, he thought, was his own special privilege. It had only been out of kindness that he had introduced his mother to this wonderful friend, but he could not conceive why he should share the baron's friendship with anyone. A dash of jealousy intermingled with his loving adoration. He could not help noticing how attentive and considerate the man was towards this interloper. . . .

As the trio made tracks for the woods, the talk was almost wholly directed towards Edgar. His frail health, his paleness, were commented upon by the woman with

THE BURNING SECRET

loving anxiety, while the baron insisted upon the sprightly wit and pleasant ways of his "friend," as it pleased him to call the lad. This created an idea of his own importance in Edgar's mind, contributing to his sense of self-esteem—a dangerous feeling to arouse in a child's heart. Thus flattered, he regained his good-humour. Never before had people conceded him any rights. Now he felt he had been given his due. He was allowed to enter into the conversation on equal terms, instead of being told that little boys were to be seen but not heard. Moreover, he spoke of certain wishes he had long been forced to repress, and they were now given serious consideration. What was there to be surprised at that such treatment should make him feel grown up? Childhood with its artless dreams lay behind him, a relic of the past, discarded like a worn-out garment.

The lady invited Sternfeldt to share her table at luncheon. A casual acquaintanceship had ripened into friendship. Our trio was now in full swing, the voices of woman, man, and child mingling harmoniously together.

ATTACK

The hunter began to think that the time had come when he could bring his quarry to bay. A trio was not to his liking. Very pleasant as a temporary convenience doubtless, but it had served its turn and was not the object of his manœuvring. He knew that, as the saying runs, "two's company, three's none"—that the presence of a third party makes it necessary for Eros to wear a mask, that, except in a duet, loving words lose their tang and the fire of an onslaught is chilled. Throughout their conversation she must never be allowed to forget what he was aiming at. He was sure she had already understood. . . .

It did not seem to Otto at all improbable that his pre-

occupation with the lady would be crowned with success. She had reached an age when a woman may well regret having remained faithful to a husband she has never loved, an age when her mature beauty craves for one last acknowledgment, when a choice has to be made between the antagonistic forces constituted by motherhood and womanhood. Life, whose riddles had long since appeared to be solved, in this fateful hour poses a fresh question, and the magnetic needle of the will hovers between the hope of a final love-experience and quiet resignation. A matron has then to decide whether she is to live for herself or for her children, whether she is to be the devoted mother or the beloved woman. The baron, who credited himself with a profound knowledge of feminine psychology, believed he had struck up acquaintance with the lady precisely at the perilous hour when she would be obliged to decide the issue as between pleasure and duty. He noticed that in their talks she rarely mentioned her husband, who plainly could satisfy no more than the most superficial of her needs. She had expected marriage to give her an outstanding position in the world, but it had failed to do so; and, worse than this, her husband had little interest in their boy. A shade of melancholy and boredom veiled her lustrous eyes, darkening her life and blunting the edges of her sensibilities.

The baron made up his mind to set about his business of conquest without further ado, but he realized that he must not betray undue haste. Like an angler playing a fish, he wished to land his catch and at the same time to postpone the moment of netting, so as to be sure that his prey did not escape him. He would assume indifference, entice her into making the first advances; whereas in reality it was he who wooed her favours. Taking advantage of his social position, he resolved to treat her somewhat arrogantly so that she would feel her in-

THE BURNING SECRET

feriority. It tickled his fancy, this thought that the glamour of an aristocratic name, the gloss of distinguished manners, would enable him to overcome her scruples and to clasp her beautiful body in his embrace.

The game was becoming an exciting one, and called for discretion. Otto spent that afternoon in his own room, well aware that he would be missed and his presence looked for. Yet, truth to tell, this deliberate absence did not so much affect the lady, who hardly noticed it, as the boy, for whom it constituted a martyrdom. Edgar felt utterly lost, utterly at a loose end. With boyish obstinacy he waited, throughout the creeping, dreary hours, for a glimpse of his friend. To have sought other recreations would have seemed to him a betrayal. He haunted the passages and stairs, and, as evening approached, his heart was filled with anguish. He began to imagine that some misfortune had overtaken the baron, or that he had given unwitting offence to his big friend. Impatient and alarmed, the boy felt his eyes brimming over with scalding tears.

At dinner, Baron Otto von Sternfeldt received a warm welcome. Edgar sprang up to greet him, and, to the astonishment of the other guests and to the distress of his mother, flung his arms passionately round the baron's neck, exclaiming:

"Oh, where have you been? We've been looking for you everywhere."

Frau Blumental reddened with vexation at being dragged into the business in this tactless fashion. She called her son to order.

"Sois sage, Edgar. Assieds-toi!"

The child obeyed, but continued to ply his questions, so that his mother again reprimanded him.

"You must remember that Baron von Sternfeldt is his own master and can do as he likes. Perhaps he finds our society boring."

Admirable, thought Otto, she had included herself in the company, so that the reproach to her child became an indirect compliment to himself.

Our huntsman was again on the alert. He was indeed in luck to have thus easily found the spoor! With bright eyes, with a flush which brought the bloom on to his cheeks, he now talked easily and wittily. Like all strongly erotic persons, his eloquence grew as he felt himself appreciated by the object of his desire. He had a gift for anecdote and sprightly repartee which, after a couple of glasses of the champagne he had ordered in honour of the occasion, outstripped even his own expectations. Big-game hunts in India with an English nobleman—here, forsooth, was a splendid subject to captivate the interest of a woman for whom such exotic experiences were unattainable. Nevertheless, it was the boy who was the most impressed by these personal experiences, and not the woman. He sat enthralled, forgetting to eat or drink, lapping up every word that dropped from Sternfeldt's lips. Who could ever have hoped to meet in the flesh a hero of dangerous exploits, and to hear the account of adventures so enchanting? Tiger hunts, brown-skinned natives, Juggernaut cars crushing thousands of human bodies beneath their weight—of these Edgar had read in books. But he had never believed that such things actually existed. They had seemed no more than fairy-tales. Now they were proved to be true. Edgar's eyes could not leave his friend's face, or, alternatively, those marvellous hands whose fingers had pressed the trigger and had killed tigers. The boy hardly ventured a question, and, when he did, his voice trembled with excitement. His lively imagination quickly called up a picture of the baron perched aloft upon an elephant's back, sitting in a purple howdah, to right and left swarthy men wearing magnificent turbans; the tiger snarling and showing its teeth; the jungle;

blood oozing from the elephant's neck where the great cat clawed. . . . Even more interesting narratives were in store, for Sternfeldt told of how old and well-trained elephants were used as decoys to entrap wild ones. Edgar's eyes sparkled. . . .

Then, shattering his magic world, came the voice of his mother, saying, as she glanced at her watch:

"Neuf heures? Au lit, Edgar!"

The boy went pale with alarm. Bedtime is for every child a bugaboo, for it implies a putting to shame, is a public demonstration that adults look upon a boy or a girl of tender years as an inferior, as a creature in need of more sleep than their Olympian selves. Doubly poignant was the disgrace of such an implication at so unique, so interesting a moment as that which Edgar was experiencing.

"Oh, Mother, do let me hear just one more story about the elephant who . . ."

He was ready to beg and pray for her leniency, when it dawned upon him that the role of suppliant little accorded with his new status as grown-up. Too late! His mother, brushing his request aside, said severely:

"Non, Edgar, il se fait tard. Monte. Sois sage. Je te raconterai toutes les histoires de Monsieur le Baron demain."

The child hesitated. Usually his mother saw him into bed. Still, he was not going to demean himself by begging a favour in front of this stranger. Not he! So Edgar merely asked:

"Promise, Mother, you'll tell me everything, you won't forget? All about the elephants . . ."

"Yes, yes."

"To-night, when you come up?"

"Yes. Now run along with you."

How Edgar managed to bid them good night without breaking down, he did not know. His throat ached with

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

suppressed tears. Sternfeldt pulled a comical face which brought a grin to the lad's mouth, but he had to make quick tracks for the exit in order to conceal the sobs which could no longer be kept in check.

ELEPHANTS

Frau Blumental remained below in converse with the baron, but their talk was no longer about elephants and big-game hunting. After Edgar had vanished through the doorway, they were both troubled, embarrassed, and the conversation began to flag. Otto suggested they should transfer to the lounge. Here they found a quiet corner. The young man ordered more champagne; and, after they had sipped a glass or two, their oppression evaporated and the talk took a dangerous turn. Baron Otto von Sternfeldt was not handsome. His youthful appearance and manly bearing, his energetic, sunburned face, his short-cropped hair, and his sprightly manner were, however, undeniably in his favour; and these were the characteristics which exercised their spell upon the lady. She allowed her gaze to dwell upon this comely companion, and no longer feared to meet his eyes.

Gradually a certain boldness entered his speech, which ruffled her sense of security as if a hand had been laid upon her, palpating her body desirously, so that the blood raced up into her face and beat feverishly in her temples. Then she would be reassured as he flung back his head and gave vent to a boyish laugh, scattering to the winds as a childish joke any suggestion of sensuousness that might have lurked in his words. At times she thought it advisable to reprove him for his delicate effrontery but, coquettish by nature, she rather enjoyed the implication, and eagerly looked forward to his next move. The game caught her, too, in its meshes; and

THE BURNING SECRET

in the end she was led to follow his lead. Her eyes spoke flattering promises, her lips uttered encouraging words. She even allowed him to sit closer beside her, and she felt his warm breath upon her naked shoulder. Like all those who engage upon a game, they became so engrossed that they forgot the passage of time, and it was not until the hall-clock struck midnight that the woman rose in alarm.

Then only did she realize how far the young man's advances had gone. This was not the first time she had played with fire, but hitherto she had never permitted things to reach such a stage. With horror it was borne in upon her that she was no longer fully mistress of herself, that something intangible was slipping from her grasp, that her senses were in a whirl. Her brain reeled, what with the wine, the momentary shock of anxiety, the ardent talk. . . .

"Good night," she said hastily. "See you to-morrow."

Already she was stretching forth her hand in farewell. He, however, was not inclined to let her get away so easily. He retained her hand in his with gentle mastery, and bent his lips to it ceremoniously. But the conventional act of politeness assumed ampler form as he kissed her slender finger-tips and followed up his advantage as far as her wrist. When his moustache brushed the back of her hand, she shivered slightly and a feeling of warmth invaded her being, anguishing and ravishing at one, and the same time. Again the tell-tale blood coursed swiftly, setting her pulses throbbing. Anxiety, senseless anxiety, deprived her of self-command, and she wrenched her hand away from his grasp.

"Stay a little while longer," Otto pleaded.

But she was already half-way to the door, walking clumsily with an excess of speed. He was more than satisfied at this display of ungainliness, for it was a sure

and certain sign that the excitement he had wished to arouse was responsible for her inelegant movements. For her part, all she could think of was to get away as quickly as possible from this man who might pursue and catch her. Yet another personality within made her sorry that he did not follow. . . . What for years she had hoped might one day happen might very well have taken place at that perilous moment: an adventure. How she loved the hazard that word implied. Often before she had been on the brink, but always she had pulled up in time. Yet she desired nothing better than to be swept off her feet by a great passion. A mere flirtation seemed to her a paltry experience.

But Sternfeldt was too proud to seize the first favourable opportunity. He knew that his victory was secured, so why take advantage of a momentary weakness, when a woman's mind was confused by liquor, to make a piratical onslaught and secure the prize? No, he must play fair; she should come to him of her own accord and when in full possession of her faculties. She could not escape him now, for the sweet intoxication had entered her soul.

As she got out of the lift, she pressed her hand upon her heart to stay its furious beating. She breathed a sigh that was partly one of relief at eluding a danger and partly one of regret that danger had not overtaken her. She felt dazed. With eyes downcast, swaying slightly like a drunken person, she groped her way along the passage to her room. Another sigh of relief as she felt the cold door-handle and turned it. . . . Safe at last!

With stealthy tread she entered, and softly closed the door so as not to disturb the child. Then she shrank back in terror. What was that, stirring over there in the darkness? She twitched all over in alarm, was about to cry for help, when a sleep-weary voice asked:

"Is that you, Mummy?"

THE BURNING SECRET

"What on earth are you up to there?" she cried, switching on the light and running towards the sofa.

Edgar lay huddled up among the cushions, but as she advanced he sat up drowsily. Her first thought was that her child was ill, and had crept into her room for aid. But Edgar said sleepily with a note of reproach in his voice:

"I waited and waited for you to come, and then I went to sleep."

"What did you want?"

"To hear about the elephants."

"Elephants? What elephants?"

But even as she spoke she remembered her promise. Poor innocent, he had slipped into her room so confident that she would be true to her word and tell him about the baron's exploits, but she had failed him, and he had fallen asleep. . . . No, this was absurd, after all; extravagantly foolish. She was outraged. Yet at bottom she was angry with herself, feeling ashamed and guilty.

"Go to your bed at once, you young scallawag," she cried fiercely.

Edgar looked at her in amazement. What had he done to put her into such a tantrum? The child's bewilderment only served to infuriate her the more.

"I told you to go to your own room. Go, at once," she said savagely, feeling all the while how unjust she was.

Without a word, Edgar slunk away. He was desperately tired and only dimly realized that his mother had broken her promise and for some unaccountable reason was angry with him. The mists of sleep encompassed his mind, and he was in no state to rebel. Every sensation was blunted by fatigue, yet he was alert enough to blame himself for having fallen asleep when it was so important to keep awake, "like a silly kid," he told himself reproachfully, as he drifted off into the Land of

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

Nod. Since yesterday morning his childhood had become detestable to him.

SKIRMISHING

It was Sternfeldt's turn to sleep badly that night. An interrupted love-adventure is not favourable to repose. A restless, dream-laden night made him regret not having seized the propitious moment. . . . The shades of sleeplessness and discontent still shrouded his mind when, next morning, he came down on his way to breakfast. The boy, who for some time had been lying in ambush, made a passionate assault, flung his lean arms round his friend, and volleyed forth questions. How jolly to have this big friend all to himself and not have to share his treasure with Mother! She did not need to tell him the wonderful stories, she had broken faith; the hero himself would give an account of those entralling adventures.

The baron was put out. He found the child's constant spying most incommodious. The deluge of questions was intolerable. The passionate love bestowed on him by the boy was becoming a burden. It was a nuisance to have a twelve-year-old jackanapes perpetually at one's heels. What he wanted was to get hold of the mother before she had cooled off. How could this aim be realized if the child was always hanging around? Uneasiness germinated in his mind. Had he done wisely to arouse Edgar's tender emotions? Certainly it was going to prove difficult to free himself from this ubiquitous youth!

Still, it was up to him to try. He was expecting Frau Blumental to appear at about ten o'clock, and meanwhile he allowed the boy to besiege him with questions. They flowed over him like an avalanche, and he needed merely to put in a word here and there to keep the child happy. When the minute-hand was at the hour, he

THE BURNING SECRET

made as if he suddenly recollected an appointment, and begged Edgar to run over to the opposite hotel to ask whether Count Grundheim, the baron's cousin, had arrived.

Radiant that the message should be confided to his care, Edgar sped off to inquire. How splendid to be of use to his friend! Eager to carry out his mission worthily, the boy hustled along—to the inconvenience and surprise of other visitors. He was keen on showing how smart a messenger he could be, and took no notice of their exasperated stares. The porter informed him that Count Grundheim had not yet arrived, and that, indeed, the gentleman's coming had not, so far, ever been announced. Edgar returned on winged feet, bringing the tidings—but the lounge was empty, the baron was nowhere to be found. No answer came to a knock at his friend's door. Dashing from hall to dining-room, from music-room to bar, he inquired from all and sundry whether they had seen Baron von Sternfeldt. Then he ran helter-skelter to his mother's quarters—but she, too, had vanished. Coming downstairs once more, he asked the porter, who told him that the pair had gone out together a few minutes earlier. The child was dumbfounded.

Edgar awaited their return with all the patience he could muster. In his innocence, he suspected nothing untoward. They'd only be gone a very short while he was sure, for the baron would want to know whether Count Grundheim had come or not. Hour followed hour, and, as they did not return, the boy grew increasingly uneasy. Ever since the morning when his seductive stranger had entered his young life, he had been in suspense. The child mind is a fragile mechanism, and every passion leaves its imprint like a seal upon wax. Edgar's eyelids began to quiver, his face became wan. He waited and waited; at first patiently, but anon becoming more and

more excited, until at last he burst into tears. Even now his suspicions were not aroused. He possessed so blind a confidence in his new friend that he attributed everything to a misunderstanding. A doubt entered his mind. Might he not have interpreted the message falsely?

At last they came back, and stood talking pleasantly in the hall just as if nothing unusual had happened. They did not seem to have missed him. Without asking for the answer to his message, the baron said :

“We thought we’d meet you on the way, Eddie.”

Overcome with confusion at the thought that they had looked for him vainly, the child protested that he had run straight back along High Street. What direction had they taken? But Frau Blumental cut her son’s indiscreet questions short, saying :

“There, there now! Children must not try to put their fingers into every pie.”

Edgar went scarlet with mortification. It was the second time she had humiliated him in the presence of his friend. Why did she do this? What was the object of making him out to be the child he no longer felt himself to be? She must envy him so wonderful a friend, and had probably planned to capture the baron for herself. How mean! Yes; and it was she, doubtless, who had deliberately led Sternfeldt in the wrong direction. But he was not going to let her misuse him whenever the fancy seized her. He’d show her! He made up his mind not to say a word to her during luncheon, but only to address his friend.

This plan was difficult of execution. What he most feared happened: neither of them noticed his fit of the sulks. Worse still, they seemed to be unaware of his presence, though yesterday he had been the focus around which had concentrated their attention and interest. They talked over his head, joked and laughed as if he were non-existent. The blood welled up into

THE BURNING SECRET

his cheeks, he felt a lump in his throat which nearly suffocated him. Keenly aware of his impotence to create a more favourable atmosphere around his person, he sat mumchance while his mother stole his only friend away from under his nose. He would have given almost anything to have the courage to stand up and thump the table with his fist—just to make them realize that he was there. But he did not dare to assert himself. He had to be content with laying down his knife and fork, and refusing to eat. In this demonstration, too, he was foiled, for they were not aware of his self-imposed fast until the final course was being served. Then his mother inquired if he was not feeling well. “Ugh,” he thought, “she’s always fussing about my health. Otherwise she doesn’t care a scrap.” His answer was curt. “Not hungry,” was all he said—and she appeared satisfied. Still they continued to ignore him. The baron seemed totally to have forgotten his existence. Anyway, he never addressed a single word to the boy. Edgar’s eyes burned with partially suppressed tears, and he was forced to adopt the childish subterfuge of wiping his mouth in order to mop up with his table-napkin the water which coursed down his face. At last the meal was over; and, with a sigh of relief, he pushed back his chair, prepared to rush away from the table.

While they had been eating, his mother had proposed an excursion to Maria-Schutz. “So she’s determined not to leave me a minute alone with the baron,” thought the child. But worse was in store. As Edgar was making for the door, his mother called him back, saying:

“Edgar, you’ll be forgetting all you ever learned if you don’t set to work on your holiday tasks. You had better stay quietly at home, and get on with your school-work for an hour or so.”

Why was she set upon humiliating him before his friend, perpetually recalling him to the fact that he was

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

a child? Edgar clenched his fists, and, turning on his heel, again made for the exit.

"Huffy? You take offence too easily, my son," she said, smiling indulgently. Then, addressing the baron, she added: "Do you find me too severe when I ask him to attend to his studies for an hour now and again?"

The baron's reply was like an icy morsel of steel plunged into Edgar's heart.

"Can't for the life of me see what harm a few hours' study could do."

Was it a plot to get rid of him? Were they leagued against him? Edgar's gorge rose.

"Dad said I wasn't to do any lessons while I was here," he declared. "Dad said I was to get well and strong."

The child's threatening aspect—or was it the reference to paternal authority?—seemed to produce an effect upon his antagonists. His mother drummed with her fingers on the table, and stared out through the window. An oppressive silence weighed upon the trio. After a prolonged pause, the baron said with a forced smile:

"Just as you please, Eddie. It's not for me to preach; I was as lazy as you make 'em at your age, and failed in all my exams."

But Edgar was long past being in a mood to respond to such pleasantries. He looked up at Sternfeldt with searching eyes, as though he would fain have penetrated to his friend's innermost thoughts. What was happening? Something had changed. They were no longer the intimates they had been. Why! The child was too young to unravel the mystery. He lowered his eyes while his heart beat like a sledge-hammer. Doubt had entered his mind.

However, the mother relented, and said:

"All right, Edgar, lie down for half an hour. Then

THE BURNING SECRET

get ready to start. You shall come with us on the drive."

THE BURNING SECRET

"How account for the change?" mused Edgar, as the three of them rolled along in a hired landau. "Why are they no longer the same to me as they were? Mother avoids my eyes. I wonder why. Why is the baron always up to some foolery as if he wanted to amuse me? But I don't want to be amused, I want him to treat me as he did, man to man. They both seem to have got quite other faces. They don't speak to me as they did yesterday and the day before. Mother's lips are so red she must have painted them. She's never done that. And he's always frowning as though he were put out. But I can't remember saying a single word that could have been taken amiss. Can't think of any reason why . . . Besides, they're not behaving to one another in the old way. One could think they were up to some game they were ashamed of. They're hiding something. I feel sure. They're not talking naturally as they did, they don't laugh any more. There's a secret they don't want me to know about. I must, at any cost, find out what this secret is. Perhaps I know what it is already. It must be the one people are always trying to hide from me; the same as is hidden in books they forbid me to read, the same as when we go to the opera and a man and a woman hold out their arms to one another, hug one another. Then there was that French governess who did not hit it off with Dad, and was given notice and sent away. All these things seem to hang together; but why, I wonder? Oh, if I could only know, just get hold of the key to the secret. Then I should no longer be a child, and have interesting things hidden from me. It's a case of now or never. I'm going to snatch their secret from them. . . ."

His brow puckered, giving his juvenile visage a quaintly old appearance. The beautiful landscape might just as well not have existed so far as he was concerned, for his whole mental energy was absorbed in trying to unravel the enigma. And yet the scene was an enchanting one. Mountains encircled with a ring of emerald trees, tender with their early spring foliage; valleys filled with wisps of iridescent mists dappled with golden sunshine. Edgar could only see his two companions opposite him, lolling on the comfortable seat of the carriage. He glared at them as though by the very force of his concentrated stare he could extract the secret from their eyes and hearts. Nothing is guaranteed to sharpen the intelligence quicker than a passion-laden suspicion; nothing is better calculated to ripen the infantile mind prematurely than the feeling that one is on the right scent without knowing what one is hunting. Children are often separated from what adults call "the real world" by a tenuous partition which a zephyr may blow down.

Edgar was convinced that he was nearer elucidating the mystery than he had ever been before; the solution seemed to be just under his hand. He was excited at the approach of discovery, and the solemnity of the occasion made him grave beyond his years. In his unconscious, he was aware that he had reached the frontiers of his childhood.

The couple ensconced in the back seat sensed opposition in the air without realizing that it emanated from Edgar. The roomy vehicle had suddenly grown too small for the three passengers. The intense scrutiny of the boy's dark eyes made the two elders uncomfortable. They hardly ventured to utter a word, to exchange a glance. They could not get back to the gossamer-light tone of their previous discourse. No matter what topic they started, the conversation soon flagged.

THE BURNING SECRET

The woman was more sensitive to the child's mutism than Baron von Sternfeldt. She was alarmed at Edgar's morose expression, and started back in disgust when she detected upon the callow visage of her son the self-same grimace as that which her husband made when he was put out. Never before had Edgar shown any resemblance to his father. Particularly at such a moment as this was she loath to be reminded of her husband. The child sitting there huddled upon the tiny seat seemed like a ghost, a reproachful guardian of her ways. She felt conscience-stricken. Suddenly Edgar glanced up, and looked her full in the eyes. Mother and son instantaneously lowered their lids. For the first time in their life together they were watching one another. This they both realized with anguish squeezing their hearts. Up till now they had blindly trusted each other; now a hedge of doubt and suspicion rose up between them. A latent hatred invaded them, a sensation so novel that neither admitted as yet that it existed.

All three were genuinely relieved when the horses drew up in front of the hotel. The drive had been wretched from start to finish, but none of them was frank enough to say so. Edgar was the first to jump out of the landau. Frau Blumental, saying she had a headache, made straight for her room. The boy and Otto were thus left alone. After paying the driver, Baron von Sternfeldt strode off towards the lounge, passing close to Edgar without so much as noticing the child's presence. He had forgotten his little friend's existence, and left the poor lad behind as if such an insignificant creature was of no more concern to him any more than the coachman on the box or the horses harnessed to the carriage.

Something broke inside Edgar's head as that beloved and slender figure receded. Despair filled his heart at the thought that this wonderful friend had brushed past without a glance or a word. What could he have done to

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

cause displeasure? The mantle of his newly acquired dignity slipped from his frail shoulders; he was no more than a small and helpless boy, as childlike and immature as he had been yesterday and during all the years that went before. With hesitating footsteps, his legs quailing beneath him, he followed in the baron's wake, caught up the older man who was about to engage in the revolving door, and stuttered:

“What have I done? Please tell me. Why don't you look at me any more? And Mother, too? Why are you and she always trying to get rid of me now? Am I a nuisance? Have I been naughty?”

Otto was alarmed at the tone of the child's voice; it troubled him strangely, and he felt moved.

“Eddie, you silly old fool, don't worry. I'm out of temper to-day, that's all. You've not done anything. You're a jolly little fellow, and I'm very fond of you.”

He rumpled the boy's hair affectionately, but at the same time he averted his head so as not to look into those huge, imploring eyes which were now brimming over with tears. The game he was playing seemed to him paltry and unworthy. He was ashamed of having wrought havoc with a child's innocent adoration. That was a mean thing to have done.

“Run along now, Eddie. We'll meet again this evening on the old terms, and this misunderstanding will be forgotten.”

“And you won't allow Mother to send me to bed so early, will you? Promise.”

“No, Eddie, trust me. But you'd better be getting to your room now. The dinner gong will be sounding soon, and we shan't have washed and changed.”

For the time being, Edgar was comforted. He felt quite happy as he went upstairs. But soon his heart misgave him. He had grown years older since yesterday,

THE BURNING SECRET

and an unknown guest had taken up quarters in his mind: mistrust.

He waited. This was to be the ultimate test. The three of them sat together at the little dining-table. Nine o'clock struck, but Mother did not send him to bed. He became uneasy. Why to-day in particular was she allowing him to sit up beyond his wonted hour? Had the baron betrayed him? Bitterly did he now repent having run after his sometime friend and put in so urgent a plea. At ten his mother got up, and took leave of the baron. Strange, but the man, too, seemed in nowise taken aback by her breaking up the party thus early, and made no endeavour to keep her as he had done before. The child's heart beat to suffocation.

Now for the test, thought Edgar. He made as if he had noticed nothing, and docilely followed his mother to the door. Arrived there, he suddenly raised his eyes and caught his mother in the act. She was smiling at the baron, an enigmatical smile, a smile of mutual understanding. So this was the explanation of her early withdrawal from the dining-room. The baron had cheated him. He was to be cajoled into obedience so that they might enjoy one another's company unmolested.

“Cad,” muttered Edgar.

“What was that you said?” inquired his mother.

“Nothing,” he replied, between clenched teeth.

He, too, held a secret within his heart. Its name? Hatred, unbounded hatred for the two of them.

SILENCE

Edgar henceforward felt easy. His heart was overflowing with one undivided emotion: hatred, open enmity. He was now absolutely single-minded. Since he knew that his presence was irksome, he took a voluptuous pleasure in sticking to them like a leech. His

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

energies were concentrated upon making their lives a burden to them. The baron was the first to feel the boy's fangs.

Next morning, when Sternfeldt passed through the lounge throwing a friendly "Good morning, Eddie," to the child, the latter did not look up but muttered a cold, hard "Good morning" in return.

"Mother down yet?"

Edgar remained buried in the newspaper.

"Don't know," he said carelessly.

The baron was surprised. What could this mean?

"Slept badly, Eddie?" he asked, facetiously.

"No," answered the boy curtly, and buried his head still deeper in the periodical.

"Silly young ass," murmured Otto, shrugging, and passing on his way.

War had been declared.

Towards his mother Edgar behaved with exaggerated politeness. A suggestion that it would be good for his health to play a game of tennis was courteously thrust aside. A fixed and rather bitter smile showed that he was no longer to be duped by such ruses. With assumed friendliness he remarked:

"I'd rather go for a walk with you and Baron von Sternfeldt, Mummy."

He glanced up at her as he spoke, and noticed her embarrassment. At length she said:

"Wait for me here," and passed into the dining-room where breakfast was served for her.

He waited; but as he waited mistrust grew stronger within him. At last he decided to go outside where he could keep the front door under observation and all the other exits likewise. His instinct told him his enemies were likely to betray him again, and he was determined not to be caught napping. Books on Red Indians had taught him how to take cover, and he crept behind a

THE BURNING SECRET

wood-pile. He chuckled contentedly when, half an hour later, his mother came stealthily out of one of the side doors with a superb bunch of red roses in her hand, and, close at her heels, the baron, the traitor.

Both appeared to be in fine fettle, to be enjoying the fact that they had given Edgar the slip, and could now relish their secret together, without the boy's watchful eye perpetually upon them.

The moment had come for the young spy to act. He sauntered along the path towards the hotel as if he had not observed them, pretending he was engrossed in the bushes and birds, giving them ample time to compose their features after their initial surprise. Very deliberately the child drew nearer, and, when a few yards away, lifted mocking eyes towards them. Frau Blumental was the first to recover.

"Ah, there you are at last, Edgar. We've been hunting for you all over the place."

"What a whopper," thought the boy, as the lie slid easily off her tongue. But he kept himself in hand, and drew a veil over the intensity of his hate. They stood in a bunch, not knowing what to do next, each watching the other.

"Well, we'd better be starting," said the woman, nervously plucking the head off one of the beautiful roses. Her sensitive nostrils quivered, and Edgar knew this was a sign that she was angry. The boy did not move. He continued to gaze indifferently aloft, into the blue firmament. At length they passed onward down the path, and he followed. One more endeavour on the baron's part.

"There's a tennis tournament this afternoon, Eddie. Don't you want to be there?"

The boy looked at his interlocutor with unconcealed disgust, and did not deign to answer. He pursed up his lips as if about to whistle.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

His presence weighed upon the two elders. They walked like convicts under guard. The child said nothing and did nothing, and yet his presence became more and more irksome as the minutes went by. He repelled their advances, their essays at conciliation. His eye-lids stung with suppressed tears, his lips were drawn and sullen. Suddenly, feeling she could bear this furtive observation no longer, the mother ordered Edgar to go on in front.

"I can't stand your dogging my steps like this. It makes me nervous."

Obediently, the boy took the lead, but every once in a while he looked back to see if they were following, and would wait for them to catch up with him if they dawdled on the way.

His obstinate silence poisoned any pleasure they had hoped to derive from this stroll, and his hostile eyes dried up the words on their lips. Baron Otto von Sternfeldt did not venture to woo, and it was with impotent fury that he sensed the woman slipping from his grasp as the passion he had been at such pains to evoke cooled under the observation of this nerve-racking and detestable child. Every time they started to converse they became tongue-tied. In the end, the trio wandered aimlessly through the forest, wrapped in a shroud of silence, while the trees rustled above their heads and the sound of their own footsteps beat upon the air. The boy had successfully wet-blanketed their conversation.

A malevolent spirit had taken up its abode in the heart of each one of them. But the child was armed and invulnerable; he took a wild delight in the fact that he, whom they despised, remained unscathed by their wrath. It was sheer delight to see how mortified the baron was, how he resented such treatment. Edgar could guess the tenor of the curses that lay unuttered upon the man's lips; he knew that his mother's temper

THE BURNING SECRET

was rising; he realized that they would have given almost anything to fall upon him tooth and nail, to get rid of him by hook or by crook. But he gave them no occasion to treat him harshly, behaving civilly, walking sedately before them. His hatred had reckoned upon hours of this martyrdom, and he was determined not to yield an iota of his advantage.

“Let’s go back,” said Frau Blumental at last, exasperated, feeling she would have to scream if the tension continued.

“What a pity,” rejoined her son placidly, “it’s such a lovely afternoon.”

Both the elders noted that the lad was making fun of them. But neither dared a rebuke, for the youngster’s outward conduct was exemplary. In two days he had acquired a self-mastery beyond his years. Not a sign could be read upon that tender face. . . . Without further discussion the trio made their way home. Alone in their suite, mother and son let fall the mask of reserve. She threw down her sunshade and gloves in a pet, thus revealing to Edgar’s watchful eyes that her nerves were on edge and that her emotions craved an outlet. Nothing better, thought the boy, than that she should give way to her exasperation. In order to provoke her he remained fidgeting about in her room. She walked feverishly to and fro, sat down, drummed with her fingers on the table, sprang to her feet again.

“How untidy your hair is,” she scolded. “Your hands are grubby—wash them at once. It’s disgusting to go about in such a state. A boy of your age, too; aren’t you ashamed?”

Edgar grinned as he betook himself to the bathroom. “She can’t stand my being with her,” he reflected maliciously.

He knew now that they were frightened of him and his relentless eyes, that they dreaded the moment when the

three of them were forced to share one another's company. Proportionally as they grew uneasy, the boy grew happy and content. They were defenceless against the child's tactics. Sternfeldt, still hoping to gain his end, was furious, and determined to pay the boy back at the first suitable opportunity. Frau Blumental was fast losing control. It was a relief to her feelings to rebuke Edgar and find fault at every turn. "Don't fidget with your spoon," she would say at table. "Where are your manners? You are not fit to take your meals among grown-ups."

The boy grinned, and continued to grin, with his head a little to one side. He knew well enough what lay behind such reproofs, and was proud at having provoked them. His expression was as calm and collected as that of a doctor by a patient's bedside. Hate is an excellent master for teaching the young self-discipline. A day or two ago Edgar would have made scenes under such trying circumstances. Now he kept silent and always silent, until they both squirmed under his silence.

The meal over, Frau Blumental got up, and Edgar prepared to follow her in the most natural way in the world. She turned on him with the irritation of a horse pestered with flies, and said vehemently:

"Why do you cling to me in this silly fashion as if you were a baby of three? I don't want you constantly hanging around, d'you hear? Children should not always be with their elders. Go and amuse yourself on your own for a bit. Read, or do anything else you have a fancy for, but for heaven's sake leave me in peace. I'm fed up with you and your stupid, tiresome ways."

So he had got her to speak frankly at last! Edgar continued to grin, whereas the baron and she seemed at a loss. The woman turned her back, furious with herself for having given the show away to the child, while Edgar said complacently:

THE BURNING SECRET

“Dad does not wish me to wander about here alone. Dad made me promise to be careful and to stick by you.”

The word “Dad” seemed to exercise a paralysing effect upon the couple, and Edgar, therefore, took a fresh delight in stressing it. His father, he felt, must also have a place in this burning secret, must wield power over the twain from a distance, otherwise why should they look so distressed at the mere mention of his name? Without deigning to answer, the woman led the way from the dining-room. The baron followed. The boy brought up the rear, not humbly as an inferior, but with the air of a warder, hard, severe, ruthless. In fancy he held them on a chain whose links he could hear rattling and which was indestructible. Hate had steeled his childish strength. He, the innocent, was more invulnerable than they who were under the ban of their secret.

THE LIARS

Time pressed. No more than a few days remained of the baron’s holiday, and these he wished to use to the full. Open conflict with an obstinate and determined child was unthinkable. The only way out of their dilemma was through flight. An ignominious surrender, undoubtedly, but what other alternative could be found if they were to escape for a couple of hours from the boy’s tyrannical observation?

“Just run along to the post and get this letter registered there’s a dear,” said Frau Blumental affably to her son.

They were standing inside, while the baron was without, engaging the services of a cabby.

Edgar took the missive gingerly. His heart misgave him. Could this be another trap? Usually his mother sent the porter on such errands. He hesitated and then asked:

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

"You'll wait for me, won't you? Where shall I find you?"

"Here."

"Honour bright?"

"Of course."

"Promise not to start without me."

This smacked rather of command than of supplication. Fancy his ordering his mother about! Their relationship had certainly altered considerably since the day before yesterday. . . . He scampered off with the letter and collided with Otto as the latter was entering the hotel through the revolving door. For the first time since their estrangement the boy took the initiative and addressed the baron:

"I'm just going to the post. Back in half a tick. Mummy's waiting for me. Please don't start before I get back."

"Naturally we shan't," murmured Sternfeldt, squeezing by.

Edgar made for the post office. Here he was held up by having to wait in line for a considerable time. Then the gentleman in front had a dozen or more questions to ask. At last came his turn. He did his business with the utmost dispatch and rushed back to the hotel, the receipt fluttering between his fingers. Just as he arrived, panting, within sight of the front door, he saw his mother and the baron driving off in the cab.

Anger arrested his headlong progress. He felt like throwing stones after the retreating pair. They had eluded his vigilance. How mean! What a beastly lie! He knew that his mother fibbed occasionally. But that she should break her pledged word—that was too much. His trust in her was shattered. Life had become an enigma. Words and promises were no better than soap-bubbles; the merest prick annihilated them. The secret must be a terrible one, Edgar thought, if it made two

THE BURNING SECRET

grown-ups break faith with a child, if it made them lie, steal away as though they were criminals. The books he had read had told him of people who had cheated in order to gain wealth or power or a throne. But what could these two be after? Why did they try to elude him? What were they endeavouring to hide behind this veil of lies? Cudgel his brains as he might, Edgar could discover no solution. And yet he felt dimly that if he could answer the riddle he would find the "open sesame" out of the realm of childhood and would enter the kingdom of an adult man. His fury at their behaviour made it impossible for him to think clearly, otherwise . . .

The forest, the dark and silent forest, would furnish an answer to his perplexities. He sought refuge in its cool shade, gave free vent to his sorrow, allowed the tears he had so far restrained to flow.

"Liars. Rotters. Traitors. Cads."

He felt that if he did not let go he would suffocate. All the anger, the impatience, the inquisitiveness, the helplessness, the treason of the last few days burst through the dam of his childish controls and found relief in tears. But this fit of unrestrained weeping closed the door forever upon his childhood. The flood carried away all the trust, the love, the reliance, and the respect which had so far been the essential constituents of his life.

The boy who later re-entered the hotel was a changed being. He was collected and purposeful. First of all he sought his own room, and washed the traces of tears from eyes and cheeks. Then he made ready for a settlement of accounts as between himself and his two foes. This satisfactorily arranged, he was prepared to wait patiently for their return.

The lounge was full of guests when the culprits alighted from the cab. Two gentlemen were playing chess. A little coterie of ladies were chatting. Various other

individuals were reading papers and periodicals. The child, alert, a trifle pale, had taken an armchair among these grown-ups. His mother and the baron were annoyed at meeting him so soon, and were about to proffer their excuses when Edgar cut them short with:

“Sir, I should like a few words with you.”

The baron was nonplussed. He felt as though he had fallen into a trap.

“Yes, yes,” he said, flustered. “Later, a little later.”

But Edgar protested in a high-pitched voice, so that everyone could hear:

“No, I want to have a talk with you now. You’ve behaved like a cad. You told me a lie. You knew very well that my mother had promised to wait for me till I got back from the post. But . . .”

“Edgar,” cried his mother, rushing towards him.

All eyes were now concentrated upon the trio, and the child, feeling that his hour had come, continued:

“I say it again so that everyone may hear. You lied, both of you—and that’s a mean thing, a caddish thing to do.”

Baron Otto von Sternfeldt went white under the barrage of eyes. Frau Blumenthal seized her son by the arm, saying hoarsely:

“Come, come up to your room at once or I’ll spank you in front of all these people. . . .”

Edgar had by now quieted down. A pity, he thought, that his excitement had got the better of him. He felt annoyed with himself, for he had intended to keep more than usually calm while challenging the baron, whereas in actual fact his anger had overmastered him. Avoiding any display of haste, he now turned towards the lift in order to seek his own quarters. His mother, embarrassed by the scrutiny of so many quizzical eyes was stammering:

“Please excuse his execrable behaviour. . . . I’m

THE BURNING SECRET

awfully sorry. . . . After all, he is no more than a child. . . .”

She detested scandal or even the lightest breath of gossip associated with her name, and she knew that the situation needed the utmost tact if she was to come out of it unscathed. To save her face, she was careful not to beat a hasty retreat, but inquired whether there were any letters for her. Then, calmly and deliberately, she made her way to the lift and went to her room. Nevertheless, she was aware of the fact that her withdrawal was accompanied by giggles and malicious whispers.

A serious situation invariably took her unawares and made her anxious. She recognized that in the circumstances she had been remiss, and she dreaded a confrontation with her child. So she loitered on the way. Edgar had donned a new visage since yesterday, a visage which paralysed her. Fear counselled her to have recourse to gentleness when dealing with her son. She realized that, if the issue was forced into the open, Edgar would prove the stronger. . . .

Opening the door quietly, she found the boy sitting in her room. There was no sign of fear in the eyes he raised to the encounter; there was not even inquisitiveness. He appeared to be absolutely sure of himself. Assuming her most motherly manner, she asked:

“Edgar what could you have been thinking of? . . . You made me blush. A child has no business to behave so outrageously to a grown-up person. You’ll have to ask the baron’s pardon. . . .”

“No,” he answered indifferently, gazing at the trees outside.

This involved her in a quandary. Nevertheless, she continued valiantly:

“What’s up, Edgar? You are so changed I hardly recognize you. You have always been such a sensible and well-mannered boy that it was a pleasure to be with

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

you. And now, all of a sudden, you behave as if you were possessed of the devil. What's your grievance against Baron von Sternfeldt? You seemed very fond of him, and he has been so kind to you. . . .”

“Yes; but that was merely to get to know you.”

“Nonsense,” she said, much perturbed. “What maggot's got hold of you?”

“He's a liar and a cad. Everything he does is calculated beforehand. He is a vulgar beast. He wanted to get to know you and thought that the easiest way was to be civil to me, and to catch me by promising to give me a dog. I don't know what he has promised you, nor why he is so friendly towards you. But I'm certain that he hopes to get something out of you, Mummy. He's a rotter, a liar. You need only look at him to know what kind of beast he is. I hate him, yes, I hate him for his lies, his caddishness, his——”

“But, Edgar, you must not speak like that . . .” she protested, while her heart told her that the child was right.

“You'll never make me believe that he is anything but a cad. Can't you see it for yourself? He's afraid of me. Why should he be? He tries to hide his real motives from me. Why? Because he knows very well that I see through him, that I know him for what he is—a cad.”

“It's not fair to say such things; really, it's not fair.”

Her mind had become a blank, and she could only reiterate the words “it's not fair.” Panic seized her, but whether on the baron's account or on the boy's, she would have found it difficult to decide.

Edgar was well aware that he had made an impression. He was tempted to lure her to his side and thus acquire a comrade to share in his hatred. He went over to where his mother was, put his arms round her, and said gently:

“Mummy darling, can't you see for yourself that he's a

THE BURNING SECRET

rotter? He has succeeded in changing you, in making you angry with me, because he wants you for himself alone. I'm sure he means to cheat you. Whatever he may have promised, he won't give—of that I am certain. Don't trust him, Mummy. He's cheated me, and he'll cheat you. He's a rotter, and no one ought to trust him."

The child's voice broke on the last words. It seemed as if she herself were speaking. And yet she felt ashamed to acknowledge that this youngster was right. She tried to maintain her dignity, as so many adults do, by assuming a lofty tone.

"Children are not the best judges in such matters. They don't understand. This is no business of yours. All you have to do is to behave like a little gentleman . . ."

The tenderness vanished from Edgar's countenance. He drew himself up, and said:

"Very well. You can't say I failed to warn you."

"So you are determined not to apologize?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

They stood facing one another, and the woman felt that her authority was at stake.

"As you will, Edgar. You will have your meal served here. You will eat alone. And I shall not allow you to share our table until you have made suitable excuses. I'll teach you your manners. You'll not move from this room until I give you leave. Understand?"

Edgar grinned. This sardonic smile seemed to have become part of him. But he was vexed with himself for having warned her (who was just as flagrant a liar as the baron) against that "vulgar beast's" advances.

Meanwhile the lady had slammed the door behind her without a glance in his direction. She was awed by the child's wrathful eyes. He had become uncanny, he knew too much, far more than it was desirable for him to know and to hear. He seemed to be an embodiment of

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

her own conscience, a reproach and an admonition. Edgar had always been a plaything, an ornament to her life, a sweet and lovable object. Occasionally, it is true, he had proved a bit of a burden and a nuisance, but, taking the rough with the smooth, she had enjoyed his company, and their lives had run placidly side by side. For the first time the child had set up his will in opposition to her own. A breath of hate was now part of their relationship.

Yet even at this moment, as she made her way downstairs, she could hear the boy's tender voice raised in warning against the man she was about to meet. She was unable to silence the inward monitor. As she passed a mirror on the landing, she stopped and contemplated her reflection. For long she looked at herself, deep, deep into her soul. Then she became aware of a smile playing about her lips, of her lips rounding themselves to pronounce a particular word—in the circumstances a dangerous word. Still the voice sounded within her; but she shrugged her shoulders as if shaking off an incubus, cast a bright glance at the answering image, smoothed her skirt, and marched off to her fate with the determination of a gambler staking his last gold piece upon the hazards of the game.

SHADOWS IN THE MOONLIGHT

A waiter brought up Edgar's supper on a tray, made the boy as comfortable as possible, and then withdrew, closing the door behind him and turning the key in the lock. "Insufferable," thought the boy, springing to his feet. To be bolted in as though he were a wild beast was too great an indignity. Could his mother really have brought this degradation upon him? His mind darkened as he meditated.

"I wonder what can be going on down there while I'm

THE BURNING SECRET

caged in this room. What are they talking about? Will their secret be disclosed, when I'm not there to share it with them? It's awful to feel there's a secret in the air, always when I'm with grown-ups. They shut me out, especially at night, and talk in whispers if I drop in and take them unawares. I feel I'm on the track of their secret, and yet I just miss guessing what it's all about. This isn't the first time I've tried to understand. Those books I sneaked from Dad's table and shelves! Only the trouble was that even when I had read them from cover to cover I never understood what they were driving at. There's something that escapes me every time. How Emma, our parlourmaid, laughed at me when I begged her to explain a passage! Oh, I think it's dreadful to be a child, full of curiosity and not daring to ask questions. Grown-ups merely grin, and look down on a fellow as if he were a fool. But something tells me I'll soon know everything there is to know. I'm not going to give in until I do. . . ."

He strained his ears to catch a possible footstep. But only the breeze murmured in the foliage, swaying the branches and breaking the moonbeams into a thousand facets of light scattered among the shadows.

"They must be up to something they are ashamed of, otherwise why should they trouble to tell me such idiotic lies? I expect they're having a good laugh at getting rid of me. Never fear, my turn will come. I've been a silly ass to allow them to lock me in. Ought to have stuck to them and never let them out of my sight. Grown-ups aren't very clever at hiding what they are doing, and they'd be sure to give themselves away before long. They fancy we children go to sleep, and they forget that we know all kinds of dodges so as to overhear what they say and see what they do. We're not so stupid as they imagine. When Aunt Clara had a baby two months ago they pretended to be ever so much surprised. But

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

they had known about its coming ages before, and I knew too, because I heard them talking. This time also I'll find out what Mother and the baron are hiding. I wish the doors were transparent so that I could watch them when they thought no one could see. I wonder if it would be a good move to ring for the chambermaid? She'd have to unlock the door to ask what I wanted. Then, before she knew what I was doing, I'd slip out. . . . No better not. That might give me away and show the servants how meanly I'm treated. No one must know, it would hurt too much, I couldn't stand it. But to-morrow . . . ”

A woman's laugh floated up to him on the spring air, was that his mother? It might well be. She had plenty of reasons for being gay. Had she not locked him up, small and defenceless as he was, got rid of him, thrown him into a corner like a bundle of dirty clothes? Stealthily creeping to the window, he peered out. A couple of girls were strolling by with their young men—no one else.

As he leaned on the sill, he noticed how close the window was to the ground; and, before he realized what he was doing, he had taken the plunge and landed in a bed of flowers. The slight noise he made passed unnoticed. He was free. Now he could go and spy upon his foes. In two days, this attitude of spying had become second nature to him who hitherto had been so candid and innocent. Careful to avoid making a sound, he prowled round the hotel, his heart beating furiously lest he should be discovered. Here was the dining-room. With the utmost precaution he pressed his face close to a window-pane. The pair were not there. He passed from window to window, not daring to enter the building in case he should stumble upon them in a passage or on the stair. He failed in his search and was in despair. Then, of a sudden, he saw two shadows issuing from a side door.

THE BURNING SECRET

He ducked so as not to be discovered. Yes, it was his mother accompanied by the inevitable baron. "Just in time," thought the boy. "What are they talking about? Wish this rotten wind wouldn't make such a row among the trees!" His mother laughed audibly. He had never heard her laugh like that; it sounded shrill, a trifle excited; most peculiar. Though Edgar felt alarmed at this unusual mirth, he was likewise reassured for, if she felt merry, there certainly could be no immediate danger threatening her. Nor could the matter the twain had in hand be anything of grave importance. Why, then, were they at such pains to hide it from him? Edgar felt rather disappointed at the thought that the secret was not something big, and worthy of the trouble he was taking to unravel it.

Whither could they be going at this hour of the night? High up in the sky a strong wind must be blowing for the clouds were racing by, obscuring the moon. So dark was it at times that one could not see the path, and then all at once the earth was radiant with clarity, and a silver sheen lay on leaf and blade. How strange, how eerie was the interplay of light and shade—like a nymph unveiling and veiling her beauties ere you could feast your eyes on her nakedness. Again the moon shone out, and Edgar saw two silhouettes—or, rather, one only, so closely were the couple walking together—making towards the forest. Why? Whither? The wind was busy among the firs.

"I'll follow," thought the child. "They'll never hear my footsteps in such a din."

Thrice blessed wind thus to muffle his movements! He slid from tree to tree, from shadow to shadow. Thrice cursed wind thus to muffle their words so that he could not hear what the enemy was talking about. If he once caught the subject of their conversation, he felt convinced that the secret would be his.

Unconcernedly, Frau Blumental and her cavalier went on their way, little suspecting the presence of a spy in their wake. They were entirely happy, and were lost to everything but the splendour of the night and their own growing interest in one another. How could they know that every step they took was dogged, and that eager eyes were watching them with hatred and curiosity?

Suddenly they stopped in the middle of the path. Edgar pressed his frail body against a tree. He gasped with anxiety. "Suppose they turn back, and Mother doesn't find me in my room? She'll guess I've been watching her, and then she'll be so wary that I shall never discover their secret." Happily at that moment the clouds scurried by, the moon shone, and the clearing was flooded with light. The boy saw that the baron was trying to entice the lady into a smaller and darker path which led up a little ravine. Edgar's mother seemed to be saying "No," but Sternfeldt urged her to consent. Why? What did he want of her? The books Edgar had read told of "murders under cover of darkness," of "abduction," of crimes innumerable. Could the baron be planning to kill her? Then here was the explanation, this was Sternfeldt had wanted to be alone with Mother, this was the reason he had induced Mother to turn the key on her own son. Should he seek help? Should he cry, "Murder"? He could not utter the syllables, for his lips were parched with excitement. So intense was his emotion that he found it difficult to keep his footing. He swayed; and, in order to steady himself, seized hold of a branch. It snapped with a loud report.

The two swung round in alarm and stared into the gloom. Edgar stood motionless, hardly daring to breathe. The silence of death lay upon the forest, for neither wind nor creature stirred. Then the woman said:

"Let us turn back."

THE BURNING SECRET

How scared she seemed. The baron, too, was frightened, and fell in with her wishes. Linked in a close embrace they retraced their steps, slowly, engrossed in their own thoughts. Edgar, profiting by their absorption, ran on all fours through the undergrowth, and arrived breathless at the hotel. Turning the key, he entered his room, undressed, and got into bed. He lay quiet for a while, recovering. Then he got up and went to the window, determined to witness their return. They must have walked very, very slowly. At long last he saw their shadows. They looked ghostly in the moonlight. Was the baron really a murderer in disguise? And had he, Edgar, prevented the bloody deed by breaking a dried and rotted branch? Again the moon shone brightly. Edgar had never seen an expression of such rapture on his mother's face before. But the baron looked wooden and disappointed—probably because his wicked scheme had come to naught, thought the boy.

As they drew near to the hotel they wrenched themselves apart. Would they glance up? No! "They have quite forgotten me!" Then with a mixture of triumph and bitterness Edgar muttered: "But I haven't forgotten you. You may fancy I am asleep or that I simply don't exist at all. Just wait; I'll show you how mistaken you are. I'm not going to let you out of my sight until I have snatched your secret from you. I'll keep awake all right."

The two stepped into the doorway. Again their shadows were united to form but one dark patch. Then the moonlight invaded the courtyard, until it looked like a field of untrodden snow.

A MIDNIGHT TUSSLE

With a catch in his breath, Edgar withdrew from the

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

window. He was terribly shaken. Never had he been so near to discovering the riddle. Excitement, adventure, murder, betrayal, these had been no more than tales a boy reads of in books, dream events, unreal, unattainable. Now, of a sudden, he felt that this awful world of risk and enterprise had roped him in, had made of him a participant. He was alarmed and pleased at so unexpected an initiation.

"I wonder what kind of a man this is who has come into our lives. . . . Can he really be a murderer? If not, why does he want to lure my mother into dark and lonely places?"

Something terrible seemed impending, and yet the boy did not know what steps to take in order to avert the evil. Of one thing he was certain: To-morrow he would write or wire to his father. But might not that be too late? Who could tell what would happen this very night? Mother had not come up to her room; she must still be with that wretch. . . .

Between one door and the other of their rooms, which were in suite, was a small lobby. Here Edgar ensconced himself, determined not to miss his chance of hearing whatever happened in the corridor. At length he heard their steps. He strained every nerve to catch what they were saying and doing.

How slow they were—just as though they were climbing a mountain, not in the least as if they were making for their rooms, tired, after a pleasant evening together. They were constantly stopping and whispering. The boy trembled with mental torment. He would have given almost anything to hear what they were saying. Still, he knew they were coming his way. But, oh, how slowly! Now he could hear the baron pleading. Now his mother's voice saying: "No. Not to-night. No."

Edgar shivered. Every step that brought them nearer

THE BURNING SECRET

to him caused him fresh agony. Then he heard the detested voice pleading:

“Please, please. Don’t say no. You’ve been so adorable the whole evening. . . .”

And his mother, frightened, on the defensive, answering:

“I dare not. No, really, not to-night. I beg you, let me go.”

Again Edgar wondered what the baron wanted her to do, and why his mother was so alarmed. Now they came to a standstill opposite the door behind which the child was lurking. He could hear them so clearly that they might have been in the same room with him.

“Come along, Mathilde, do! Please, please.”

His mother sighed; her protests became weaker. Hullo! What was happening? Frau Blumenthal did not enter her room, she passed along the passage. What did this mean? Why were they no longer talking together? Was it possible that the wretch had gagged her and was now in the act of throttling her?

Maddened with alarm, the child opened the door—only a crack, but through this he could see what was going on. The baron had his arm round his mother’s waist and was cajoling her into acquiescence. She seemed to be nothing loath. Arrived at Sternfeldt’s door they stopped.

“Now he’s going to commit the crime,” thought the boy, his head filled with reminiscences of penny-dreadful stories.

Banging the door behind him, he stamped down the passage and butted in upon the lovers. His mother drew abruptly aside, alarmed by the sudden onslaught. Then she dropped as if in a faint, and was caught in the baron’s arms. At the same time, the baron became aware of two small fists pummelling his face, bashing his lips against his teeth, and nails scratching him like a cat’s claws. The

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

alarmed woman quickly took to her heels, while the man hit back at his assailant before grasping who it was.

Edgar was only too conscious of the fact that his puny strength could not hold out against the vigorous onslaught of a man in the prime of life. Nevertheless, he determined to do his best, and at least to show the intensity of his hatred. He banged away with all his might, his lips set firm, his teeth clenched. By now the baron had recognized the spy, and gave the lad a generous drubbing. He was furious at having his holiday ruined by this tiresome young monkey. Edgar suffered without uttering a sound. The struggle continued for several minutes in the dimly lighted passage until Sternfeldt, growing aware how ludicrous was this encounter between a man and a child, tried to seize Edgar by the nape and hold the boy at arm's length. Feeling that he would be overpowered by the man's superior strength and longer reach, the youngster turned savagely and clenched his teeth in Sternfeldt's right hand. A low growl issued from the baron's throat, he relaxed his grip, and before he could recover his presence of mind Edgar was back in his own room and had bolted the door.

No one had been aware of this midnight affray. All were asleep. Everything was as still and silent as the tomb. Otto wiped the blood from his hand with a handkerchief. He peered uneasily into the dark recesses of the corridor. Not a soul to be seen! And yet, up there, was there not a light, flickering in the draught, and a low, mocking laugh?

STORM

"Was it all a terrible dream?" Edgar asked himself when he awoke next morning. His head ached, and as his eyes travelled down his body he saw that he had

THE BURNING SECRET

gone to sleep in his clothes. He jumped up, and ran to the looking-glass. There he was confronted with a pale, drawn face, tousled hair, a red swelling upon a smudgy forehead. With an effort the child collected his thoughts, trying to remember what had happened. Yes, he had come to fisticuffs with his enemy, out there in the passage, sometime after midnight; had then rushed back to his room; had thought of decamping; had been overwhelmed by fatigue; had thrown himself on to his bed without undressing; and had fallen into a restless sleep, full of nightmares and the stench of freshly spilled blood.

In the garden below he could hear the sound of footsteps on the gravel; voices floated up to him; the sun was high in the heavens. It must be late. He consulted his watch, but found it had stopped. In his excitement he had forgotten to wind it up. Curiously enough this uncertainty as to the hour disquieted him more than anything else. He quickly undressed, washed, and dressed himself again. Then he went downstairs, feeling slightly guilty and very much disturbed.

He found his mother sitting in the dining-room over her breakfast. Alone, thank goodness. It was a relief not to have to look upon that hated countenance. . . . But Edgar was not quite sure of himself as he stepped up to the table and wished his mother "Good morning."

She gave no response, continuing to stare fixedly out of the window. Her face was very pale, deep shadows lay around her eyes, and her delicate nostrils quivered as they invariably did when she was greatly moved. Edgar bit his lips. Her silence puzzled him. Did she know who had attacked Otto von Sternfeldt in the passage? Had he seriously damaged the baron? Doubts assailed him and tortured him. Her sightless, staring eyes alarmed him even more profoundly; he was afraid to move lest they should suddenly be turned upon him;

he drank his coffee and ate his roll with as little movement as possible so as not to attract her attention. He thought she must be exceedingly angry. A quarter of an hour went by, while he waited for something to happen. Not a word was spoken. Then, still behaving as though he were not present, his mother got up and went out. What was he to do? Remain sitting at the table, or follow her? In the end, he decided upon the latter course. She continued to ignore him, so that he felt more and more humiliated. He lagged behind, not knowing whither to go. In the end, he went up to the suite he and his mother occupied—but found the outer door locked against him.

Yesterday's hardihood had completely disappeared; he had not a notion what to do. Perhaps he had acted badly when he fell upon the baron tooth and nail. Could they be preparing some terrible retribution or a fresh humiliation? He was convinced they were concocting a plan, setting a trap for unwary feet. There was a feeling about those two as when a storm is brewing and flashes of lightning speed from cloud to cloud. This burden of misgiving weighed heavily upon his spirit throughout the morning, and it was a very small and diminished Edgar who finally presented himself at the luncheon table.

"Good day," he said, once more endeavouring to break the silence which hung like a threatening cloud over his head.

She looked through him, and again made no answer. Edgar now recognized how terribly angry she was, so angry, indeed, that she did not venture to speak. Never had he roused her to such a pitch of exasperation. The boy's heart sank; he was genuinely frightened. Hitherto when she had scolded him it was, rather, an affair of the nerves than of the emotions, a summer storm that was quickly over and followed by an indulgent laugh.

To-day he felt that he had stirred her to the depths, had aroused something wild and untamed in her nature, and he trembled in face of the forces he had unleashed. Hardly a morsel of food could he swallow; his throat was dry, his lips were cracked. His mother seemed unaware of his desperate plight. But when the horrible meal at last came to an end and they rose from table, Frau Blumental turned casually to her son and said:

“Come to my room, Edgar. I wish to have a few words with you.”

No threat in her voice, thank goodness! But, oh, how icy and aloof was her demeanour. Her words fell over Edgar like a cold douche and made him shiver. His defiance oozed away. Like a whipped cur, the child followed his mother in silence to her room.

She prolonged Edgar’s martyrdom by sitting for a while without uttering a word. Through the open window came the joyous laughter of children at play; but Edgar’s heart beat to suffocation. Frau Blumental, too, was ill at ease, avoiding her son’s eyes even when she began to speak to him.

“I don’t intend to tell you what I think of your conduct, Edgar. The mere thought of it horrifies me. You will pay for the consequences. But you are certainly not fit to mix with grown-ups and sensible people. I have written to your father and told him that your unruly behaviour needs stricter discipline than I am able to provide. I have suggested he find you a tutor, or that he send you to a boarding-school, where you will be taught your manners. That is all. I myself shall not bother about you any more.”

Edgar’s head sank on his breast. He knew that this was only a prologue, and that worse was in store. Frau Blumental continued:

“You will have to apologize to Baron von Sternfeldt . . .”

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

The boy trembled; but she was adamant, and refused him a moment's pause for a protest.

"The baron left this morning and you will write him a letter to my dictation. . . ."

Again Edgar made as though to speak, and again his mother went on precipitately:

"Not a word! Sit down. There is a sheet of paper and a pen. . . ."

Edgar looked up at her. He read decision in her hard eyes. Never had she looked like this. He seated himself at the table, took up the pen, and bowed his head low over the paper.

"Date it. Done? Leave a line. Good. Now write, 'Dear Baron von Sternfeldt.' Comma. Leave another line. A little to the right, begin, 'I am sorry to learn that you have left Semmering,' two m's in Semmering. Got that? Very well. Continue the sentence, after a comma, 'and that I cannot say good-bye to you personally but only by letter'; hurry up, no need to write as if you were doing a copy. Full stop. 'Also, I want to ask your pardon for my unseemly conduct last night. Mother told you that I am convalescent after a severe illness and am easily overwrought. That makes me do things for which I am very sorry afterwards. . . .'"

The bowed back straightened; Edgar turned round, defiance blazing up anew.

"That's not true; I won't write . . ."

"Edgar," cried his mother threateningly.

"It's not true. I've done nothing to be sorry for. I've done nothing naughty for which I need beg anyone's pardon. All I did was to run to your side when you called for help."

Her lips blanched; her nostrils quivered.

"I called for help? You're crazy."

Edgar sprang fiercely to his feet.

"Yes, you did, out there in the passage, last night,

THE BURNING SECRET

when he caught hold of you. 'Let go of me. Leave me,' you said so loud that I could hear the words quite plainly from my room."

"You are lying, my poor child. The baron and I were not in the passage. He merely saw me to the landing."

Such a brazen falsehood took the boy's breath away. He was stunned, looking at her with scared eyes, and stammering:

"You . . . were . . . not in . . . the passage? And he . . . did not . . . take . . . hold of you? Forcibly . . . against your will . . .?"

She laughed; a cold, dry laugh.

"Must have been dreaming, my boy."

This was too much for Edgar. He knew that grown-ups lied, that they used funny words to express what was not true, told fibs, had recourse to strange ambiguities. But anything as bold-faced as this he was utterly unprepared for.

"And is this huge bump on my forehead also a dream?"

"How am I to know what other young jackanapes you've been fighting with? Come now, I don't want any back-talk from you. Sit down and write."

She had gone very pale, and was making a great effort to remain calm.

But Edgar crumpled up; a last faint ember of credulity and trust in his elders was quenched. How could anyone trample on truth so ruthlessly? He would not believe that a monstrous lie such as this could go unscathed. He rallied his forces, became cool and collected and bitter. An ironical, bantering, and sarcastic tone entered his voice.

"So I've been dreaming, have I? All that happened in the passage, this bump on my forehead—just a dream! And of course you and he did not go for a walk in the

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

moonlight. Neither did he try to get you down a small, dark path in the forest. Oh, no, nothing of that is true, is it? But did you really fancy I was going to allow myself to be locked into my room like a naughty child? Not such an ass. I know what I know."

He looked her squarely and pertly in the face, and this saucy expression cowed her for a moment. It was dreadful to see hatred gleaming from the eyes of her only child. Then her anger broke loose.

"Enough! Write what I tell you, immediately—otherwise . . ."

"Otherwise what?" he demanded peremptorily.

"Otherwise I'll beat you as if you were in very fact a little child."

Edgar stepped close up to his mother a jeering and challenging laugh issuing from his mouth.

Her hand was already raised and came down in a resounding smack upon his head. He uttered a yell of rage and surprise. Then, like a drowning man whose ears are buzzing, whose hands vainly strive to find some flotsam whereon to cling, he struck out blindly. Something soft and yielding countered his fists. Again he struck, this time upwards towards a blanched face. A cry . . .

The scream of pain brought him to his senses. What had he done? Something terrible, something unforgivable. He had struck his mother. Frightened, ashamed, disgusted, he wished the floor would open and swallow him up. He must get away from those horrified eyes. Away . . . away. Edgar stumbled towards the door, down the stairs, through the hall, into the forest. Oh, to get away, far away! He rushed along as if pursued by a pack of hounds giving tongue.

REVELATION

At length Edgar halted. His limbs, his body trembled so violently that he had to support himself against a tree. His breath came quickly and spasmodically. What was he to do? Where could he go? Impossible to remain here, almost within sight of the house which had been his temporary home. He was forsaken, helpless. The world was a harsh and unfeeling place. Even the trees which but yesterday afforded shelter from the sun and had clustered round him in brotherly affection, now stood aloof and looked down grimly. The unknown lay ahead of him. His loneliness amid the vastness of nature filled him with dread. Such solitude could not be borne, he must go somewhere and find a companion. He dared not seek out his father in Vienna, for Herr Blumental was a martinet and would insist upon Edgar's prompt return to Semmering. This thought was intolerable. Better by far to be alone and to journey forth into the unexplored. He felt as if never again could he look his mother in the face without remembering that he had struck her with his fist.

But what about Grandma? She had always made much of him—such a kind old lady. Invariably she had been on his side when he had got into trouble at home. He could hide in her house in Baden until his parents' anger had cooled off. From there he would write a long letter, begging Dad and Mummy to forgive him. All the pride had seeped out of him. He felt very small and helpless in the midst of this huge and antagonistic universe, and wanted nothing better than to become once again the child he had been a few days ago.

How did one get to Baden, he wondered. Pulling out a shabby purse which was his inseparable companion, he extracted a gold piece that had been given him for his

birthday. How he had polished it every day with his grubby handkerchief, until it shone and shone again! He had never been able to make up his mind to spend it. Like a little sun it was. Lovely. Bright. Beautiful. Would it suffice to pay for his railway fare? Often and often he had travelled by train! Yet never had it entered his head to inquire how much a journey cost. For the first time in his short life he was up against reality. Things he had taken for granted apparently possessed a value of their own and could not be had for the asking. They needed to be paid for in hard cash. A short hour ago he thought himself so wonderfully clever, knowing all there was to know. But there were hundreds of problems and secrets that were a sealed book to him. He realized his shortcomings now. More and more did the sense of humiliation master him as he made his way to the station. Often and often he had dreamed of setting forth into the world to win his laurels, to become an emperor, a king, a famous soldier, a poet. Now that he had finally realized part of this dream, he felt exceedingly small, and, as he fixed his eyes on the station building, his mind was wholly preoccupied with the question: "Shall I have enough to pay for my ticket?" The shining rails ran away into the infinite; not a soul could be seen on the platform or in the waiting-room. Edgar tiptoed up to the ticket office and asked softly and modestly how much it cost to go to Baden. A pair of surprised eyes looked through the little hole, and smiled not unkindly at the timid youngster.

"Half fare, or a whole?"

"Whole," stammered Edgar, every atom of conceit punched out of him.

"Six crowns."

"Please give me a ticket."

He shoved the shining treasure across the diminutive counter, picked up the ticket and change. The piece of

THE BURNING SECRET

cardboard spelled freedom. He thrust the silver coins into his pocket, and listened well satisfied to the muffled clinking as they rattled together.

Only twenty minutes till the train was due. Edgar crept into a doorway, so that no one should catch sight of him. A few passengers trailed in and wandered aimlessly about the platform. They failed to notice the runaway, though he himself felt as if all eyes were upon him. A whistle in the distance came as an immense relief to his suspense. Here was the train destined to convey him right away into the world. It was not until he had already stepped into a first-class carriage that he noticed he had been given a third-class ticket. So there were differences between travellers, he thought. Another initiation! His neighbours, when he had rectified his mistake, were a couple of Italian workmen, with calloused hands and rough voices. They had slung their tools on to the rack, and were sitting relaxed and listless. "They must have been working very hard," mused the child, as one of them nodded off to sleep. "I suppose they earned money for what they did. How much, I wonder?" Money, then, was a thing one had to earn, that one was not automatically provided with. So far Edgar had taken his comfortable circumstances for granted, and had never given a thought to those abysses of misery which beset him on either hand. There were professions and trades to be followed, incomes to be earned—so many secrets he had never even noticed. He had learned much during his hour of solitude; and, as he cogitated these problems yet further and gazed at the fleeing landscape through the window, greater and greater illumination came to him. Gradually amid his gloomy anxiety, something seemed to grow up and to blossom as he became conscious of the amazing kaleidoscope presented to him by life. He had run away because he was a coward and had been scared: true, but through

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

his poltroonery he had come to taste the sweets of independence, he had come into contact with a reality he had hitherto completely ignored. Was he himself not just as great an enigma to his father and mother as the world had been to him? Quite possible. He saw with a new vision, as if manifold veils had been torn away from his eyes, as if the inside of things was being revealed to him, as if the secret of secrets was being disclosed. Houses flew past as though borne on the wings of the wind. Who were the people dwelling inside all these cottages and farmsteads, Edgar wondered. Were they rich or poor, happy or unhappy; were they full of uneasy longing as he was; did they want to know everything; were the children, like himself so far, merely playing with life? At the level crossings, the switchmen with their little flags were no longer the puppets he had always thought them, toy men, objects set up at those particular spots by chance. Edgar understood now that they had a function to perform, that they were fulfilling their destiny, had entered upon the struggle for life. The train gained in speed as it wound its way down the valley, leaving the high mountains behind. The contours were softened with the tender green of springtime. Only once did the fugitive look back at the high country he had left. The hills were blue, distant, unattainable. As they receded more and more, and were swallowed up in the late afternoon fogs, it seemed to him that he had left childhood behind for ever in those remote and austere regions.

BEWILDERING DARKNESS

When at length he stood alone on the platform at Baden, watched the signal lights, and realized that night was upon him, his more hopeful and cheery mood petered out, and he felt an immense desolation descend-

THE BURNING SECRET

ing upon him. While daylight lasted he had been surrounded by human beings; there were all manner of interesting things a small boy could do, sit on a bench and watch the passers-by, wander along streets looking into shop windows. But what was going to happen when everyone withdrew behind closed doors, when they retired to bed, went to sleep, while he, feeling guilty of wrong-doing, slunk about the empty streets, unwontedly alone and forsaken? He must seek shelter at once, not a minute to waste; of that he was profoundly convinced.

Without casting a look to right or to left he made a bee-line towards his grandmother's villa. It lay back from the road in a garden sheltered by shrubberies and covered with ivy and other creepers. It peeped out white within its framework of green, a friendly, old-fashioned abode. Edgar looked over the hedge, feeling almost like a stranger. Nothing stirred, no lights shone from the windows; Grannie and her guests were probably sitting over their coffee on the lawn to the rear.

He already had his hand on the bell-pull, when an alarming thought entered his mind. So far his resolve to ask his dear Grannie for shelter had seemed quite natural to him. But suddenly he had a doubt. What excuse could he furnish for his unexpected arrival? How was he to answer her inevitable questions? He saw in fancy the old lady's look of surprise when he told her that he had run away from his mother. Besides, he would have to confess having hit his mother, and the enormity of this crime weighed heavily upon him. A door banged. He started violently, and panic seized him. Suppose someone came out and caught him loitering! He scampered off, hardly knowing where his legs were taking him.

Arrived at the town-park gates, he came to a stop. Here it was very dark, and no one was to be seen. Per

haps he could find a vacant seat, sit down quietly, and think over the situation undisturbed. He slunk along a deserted alley-way. The trees looked ghostly in the dim light of the lamps, but farther on, up a little hill which he climbed, everything lay in darkness, the mist-laden gloom of a spring night. A solitary couple or two sat absorbed. He passed quickly by, for he wanted to be alone. But no solitude was to be found. Whispers could be heard coming from the shadowy depths of trees and bushes, borne upon the wind, mingling with the rustle of leaves and grass-blades; stealthy footsteps sounded along the paths, a sigh, a low laugh, mysterious, voluptuous. Did these murmurs come from human beings or from the beasts? Nature seemed wrapped in sleep, and yet all things were astir. A ferment of living matter was at work, disquieting in the extreme to a highly-strung child. Could it all be part of the springtime?

Never had he felt smaller and more impotent, as he huddled upon a bench and tried to think out what he should do, and how explain his flight. But he found it impossible to concentrate his thoughts. In spite of his best endeavours, his ears were always pricked to catch the sound of those mysterious voices issuing from the gloom. The darkness was terrible and perplexing? yet how enigmatically beautiful! This rustling and soughing, this whirring and allurement, did it emanate from animals or from men? Or was it merely the breeze among the boughs? Edgar listened. Yes, it was the wind shaking the leaves. . . . No, it came from that couple over there, held in a tight embrace. Man and woman. They had strolled hither from the glare of the town, in order to be alone in the darkness. What were they up to? If he could only find an answer to that question he would find peace, and his tortured mind would be at rest. Two people, but so closely pressed together as to form but a single shadow—just as it had

THE BURNING SECRET

been with his mother and the baron. . . . So the fateful secret clung to this place too? Footsteps drew nearer; a soft gurgle of laughter could be heard. Supposing this approaching couple should catch sight of him? He cowered farther back into the darkness. But they did not see him. They passed quietly by, wrapped in one another's embrace. Edgar was beginning to breathe freely once more, when they stopped, pressing their faces together, and a sigh of content escaped from the woman's mouth. The man spoke a few rapid words. Edgar felt horribly frightened, and at the same time he thrilled with an unknown pleasure. A minute later the gravel crunched beneath their feet; the pair were swallowed up in the shadows.

Edgar's pulses beat furiously, and a sense of solitude gripped him. He longed to hear the sound of a friendly voice; to feel an affectionate hug; to see a lighted and familiar room, people he knew and loved. The uncanny darkness of the night had sunk into his very marrow. He would burst if he did not shake himself free.

Home! Home! A warm and lighted room! Persons he knew! All would be well, then. Nothing bad could happen if he were once with his own people. They might scold him or even beat him, he did not care so long as he had no more to dwell in darkness and solitude.

Hardly knowing what he did he ran on and on, till again he found himself in front of Grandma's house, with his hand ready to pull the bell. Through the curtain of greenery, he saw that the windows were alight; in imagination he pictured the familiar rooms, and their occupants. This proximity was a pleasure; and if he still hesitated to ring, it was merely to revel in his happiness, in the knowledge that he was near to those he loved and who loved him.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

A shrill voice behind him brought him back to earth.
“Master Edgar, why, here you are at last!”

It was his Grannie’s housemaid who had come out for an airing. She ran up to the boy and gave him a hearty embrace. The doors, magically, swung open, the dogs dashed down the drive to bark a welcome, people were coming from the house with candles and lanterns, voices of mingled alarm and delight sounded in his ears, a friendly tumult of noises, shapes of persons he knew. . . . His grandmother, who hugged him tight, and, behind her—could he be dreaming?—his mother. Abashed, trembling, on the verge of tears, the boy stood stock-still, not knowing which way to turn or what to do. Was he frightened? Or was he happy?

THE LAST DREAM

Yes, it was his mother. Through inquiries made at Semmering station, she had traced the direction of his flight. She had wired to her husband in Vienna, to Grannie in Baden. He was expected. Why had he not arrived? Frau Blumental, taking the express, had outstripped him. They led him in subdued triumph to the sitting-room. True, he was scolded; but the scoldings did not wound him, for in the eyes of those that scolded he saw nothing but joy and love. Even their assumed anger could not last; it fizzled out almost before the reprimand had been made. Now Grannie was hugging him again, and crying over him. No one reproached him. Wonderful! He felt as though he were a prisoner of love. The maid pulled off his thin coat and muffled him in a warm shawl; asked him if he were not hungry, or if there was anything she could bring him. He had hated being looked upon as a child; but now he revelled in the bliss of being cared for. The arrogance and presumption of the last few days vanished.

THE BURNING SECRET

The telephone buzzed in the neighbouring room. His mother answered the call. "Yes . . . Edgar's come . . . it's all right . . ." Why was she not furious with him, he wondered. Her dear eyes caressed him with a strange expression. His immediate impulse was to disregard all the coddling his Grannie and his Aunt Bertha were lavishing upon him and to throw himself into Mummy's arms, to tell her how sorry he was, to promise anything she liked. He got up. But Grannie asked in alarm:

"Where are you going, pet?"

Anxious, were they, if he so much as moved? They fancied he was running away again. So he had given them all a jolly good fright? How could he ever make them understand that no one regretted this flight so much as he.

They served him an impromptu supper. Grannie sat by him, and never took her eyes off him. She and Auntie and the maid formed a loving circle round him. The warmth of their affection solaced him marvellously. But why was his mother not present? He felt uneasy at her absence. If she could only guess how utterly crushed he was . . .

A carriage drew up outside. Grannie left the room. Amid a medley of voices he recognized his father's. Auntie and the maid had also gone out into the hall. Edgar was again alone, and again he was frightened by solitude. His father had always treated the boy with the utmost severity, and had made himself feared. Now Edgar listened to his father's voice on the other side of the door. He appeared to be excited, and spoke in loud and angry tones. Grannie and Mummy seemed to be using their best endeavours to appease him. Resolute footsteps approached. The door opened.

Herr Blumenthal was a very tall man, so that Edgar felt as tiny as a doll when he was asked, in a harsh voice:

"What possessed you to run away and give your mother such a fright, you young scoundrel?"

The man was genuinely angry; but Mummy came in directly behind her husband. Her face was in shadow so that the boy could not take his cue from her and, therefore, did not answer.

"Well? Lost your tongue? What was wrong? Own up, don't be afraid. There must be some reason for running away. Anybody hurt your feelings?"

Edgar hesitated to reply. Anger and pique revived in him. Should he justify himself? He raised his eyes and looked at his mother. She was still in her husband's huge shadow, but the boy saw her make an unwonted gesture. She slowly raised a finger to her lips, and her eyes implored silence.

The child's heart warmed. He understood that she was begging him to keep her secret. How proud and happy he felt that she should ask him this service. Pulling himself together, he said:

"No, Dad! I was having a lovely time. Mummy was ever so good to me. But suddenly I felt I had to do something thoroughly naughty. So I ran away."

Herr Blumental looked at his son dubiously. He had expected anything but this, and was disarmed by so abject a confession.

"Well," he answered, "if you're sorry, there's no more to be said. Another time I trust you will reflect before behaving so rashly." He gazed kindly down at the boy and his voice took on a softer tone. "You're looking a bit pale, but you've grown a lot since you left home. Don't be up to any more childish pranks. You are no longer a kid, and must try in future to be reasonable. . . ."

Edgar gazed fixedly at his mother. There was a gleam in her eyes he had never seen before, they were moist and bright, while round her mouth played an elfin smile which seemed full of gratitude.

THE BURNING SECRET

He was now sent off to bed, but he felt no resentment, neither did he mind being left alone once more. His head buzzed with thoughts. All the suffering of the last few days was swallowed up in the freshness and delight of this first real experience, and he looked forward undauntedly to further encounters with reality. The trees without soughed and swayed in the wind, but he was not saddened by the noise. Life was rich and manifold; he had seen it naked before him, bereft of lies and subterfuges, full of a perilous beauty. Hatred for persons or things seemed to him now a childish stupidity and misapprehension. Even the baron, his enemy, shared in the boy's exuberant gratitude, because it had been through this false friend that the door into a wonderland of the emotions had been opened.

He lay in the dark, contented, proud, and happy. Sleep had almost enfolded him, when he became aware of someone moving softly in the room and of a hand gently stroking his hair. Tears dropped on to his cheeks . . . and, without a word, his mother kissed him fondly. Not until many years later did Edgar understand the full meaning of these tears and kisses. They were a vow that henceforward Mummy would devote all her energies, all her love to him; that there would be no more adventures in her life; that she had said farewell to the pleasures of the flesh. She was grateful to her child for saving her from a futile and unworthy liaison; and, in a bitter-sweet compunction, she pledged herself to her boy's service. Though Edgar could not, child that he still was, grasp the significance of all this at the time, he nevertheless felt that it was glorious to be loved so much, and he surmised that in some incomprehensible manner such love was inextricably interwoven with the major secret of life.

After she had withdrawn and closed the door behind her, Edgar felt her presence and the warm glow of her

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

lips upon his cheek. As he gradually dropped off to sleep, he drowsily wished he might often feel the pressure of soft lips against his own. A final and confused vision of the last eventful days swept before him; fate turned the pages of the Book of Youth; the child fell asleep, and the profound dream of life began to unfold itself.

MOONBEAM ALLEY

STORMY weather had delayed the ship, so that the evening was far advanced before she came to port on the French coast. Having missed the train which was to have carried me farther on my journey, I had a whole twenty-four hours on my hands. How could I best while away the time, marooned as I was in this unknown coast-town? There did not seem to be much doing. Melancholy strains of dance music issued from a dubious-looking haunt—not particularly attractive, I thought. The alternative would be to spend the interlude in desultory converse with my fellow-passengers. In the dining-room of the third-rate hotel where we put up, the air was thick with the smell of burned fat and tobacco smoke. Besides, it was an ill-kept and dirty place, its filthiness rendered all the more intolerable since for many days now I had enjoyed the pure ocean breezes and felt the salt, sweet taste of sea-spume upon my lips. I decided to go for a stroll along the broad main street leading to a square where the local band was giving a concert. It was pleasant to allow oneself to be carried gently along by the stream of idlers who, having done their work for the day, were taking the air after a wash and brush-up followed by a cosy meal at a provincial fireside. After a while, however, the jostling of the crowd and its empty laughter vexed me sorely; I found it exasperating to be gaped at because I happened to be a stranger in their midst; the physical proximity of so many unknown human beings was nauseating in the extreme.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

The voyage had been far from calm, and the movement of swelling waters was still in my veins. Under foot, the earth seemed to be heaving and rolling, the whole street and the skies swayed like a see-saw. I felt giddy and in order to escape, I ducked my head and plunged down a side street without taking the trouble to decipher its name. This led me into an even narrower thoroughfare, where the din of music and mob was muffled almost to extinction. One street opened out of another like the anastomoses of arteries and veins. They were less well lighted the farther I withdrew from the central square, which was brightly illuminated with arc-lamps. Overhead the stars could be distinguished, now that my eyes were no longer dazzled by the glare. How dark the intervening spaces of heaven appeared as I gazed upward!

This must be "sailor-town," quite near the harbour, for my nostrils were tickled with the stench of rotting fish and seaweed and tar, with the indescribable odour issuing from badly ventilated houses wherein the air remains stagnant until it is swept away by a health-bringing gale. Such twilight as hung over these alley-ways was healing to my mind. It was delightful to be alone. I slackened my pace, studied the narrow streets, each of which was different from the others, being here coquettish or amorous, there wrapped in inviolable peace. All, however, were dark, and filled with the soft murmur of voices and music which arose from nowhere in particular, but from unseen springs deep within the houses. Doors and windows were tightly shut, and the only lights were red or yellow lanterns hanging from a porch at rare intervals.

I have a special predilection for such quarters in unknown towns, these foul market-places of the passions, filled with temptations for men who sail the seas and who turn in here for a night of pleasure, hoping to realize

their dreams in one short hour on land. These places are obliged to tuck themselves away out of sight in the less "respectable" areas of the town, because they tell a plain tale which the snug and well-built houses of the elect hide behind a hundred veils. Tiny rooms are crowded with dancing couples; glaring placards lure into the picture-houses, square-faced lanterns twinkle in doorways and beckon unambiguously to the passer-by. Drunken voices clamour from behind the red-curtained windows of drinking booths. Sailors grin at one another when they meet, their eyes are greedy with expectation, for here they may find women and gambling, drink and display, adventure that is sordid or worth the risk. But these allurements are discreetly housed behind drawn blinds. You have to go inside to find them out, and the mystery only serves to enhance the lure. Similar streets and alleys exist in Hamburg and Colombo and Havana and Liverpool, just as in these cities the broad avenues and boulevards where the wealthy forgather are likewise to be found, for the upper stratum of life and the lower bear a close resemblance everywhere in the matter of form. These disorderly streets are strange vestiges of an unregulated world of the senses, where impulses continue to discharge themselves brutally and without rein; they are a gloomy forest of the passions, a covert full of manifestations of our instinctive and animal existence; they stimulate by what they disclose, and allure by the suggestion of what they hide. They haunt our dreams.

A sensation of being trapped in this maze overwhelmed me. I had chanced to follow a couple of cuirassiers who, with swords clanking along the uneven pavement, were taking a stroll. Some women on the booze in a bar shouted coarse jokes as the pair sauntered by; shrieks of laughter, a finger knocking on the window, an oath from within—and then the men went on. Soon the ribald

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

mirth grew so faint that I could barely catch the sound. Silence closed round me, a few windows were dimly lighted, the watery moon shone through the mist. I breathed my fill of the stillness, which was almost uncanny, seeing that behind it lurked a universe of mystery, sensuousness, and peril. The silence was a lie, for it covered the accumulated filth of a whole world. I stood listening, and peering into the void. All sense of the town, the street, its name, and even my own name vanished; I was cut adrift, my body in some miraculous way had been taken possession of by a stranger, I had no activity in view, no reason for being where I was, no relationship to my surroundings—and yet I was acutely conscious of the seething life that beset me on all sides; it flowed through my veins as if it were my own blood. Nothing that was happening was doing so on my account, though everything was germane to myself. An inexpressibly delightful feeling that I was not a participant was accompanied by the conviction that I was in for an experience which would bore down into the deepest springs of my being—a feeling which, whenever it comes to me, suffuses me with a pleasure that emanates from communion with the unconscious.

As I stood thus expectant, listening into the void, a voice came to me from a distance, muffled by intervening walls, but unmistakably singing in German. A simple melody, indeed; the “Schöner, grüner Jungfernkranz” from Weber’s *Freischütz*. A woman’s voice, badly trained, but German, yes indeed, German. Strange to hear one’s own tongue in so out-of-the-way a corner; and friendly, homely, at the same time. Poorly as the air was sung, it held a greeting from the land of my birth. Who can speak German here, who can be moved to hum this innocent refrain? Straining my ears against house after house, I reached one where there was a glimmer in one of the windows, and the

shadow of a hand silhouetted against the blind. All doors were shut, and yet invitation to enter was to be deciphered on every brick and lintel. Nearer and nearer I approached the sound. This was the house! I hesitated a moment, and then pushed my shoulder against the door, having drawn aside a curtain which shielded the interior from draughts. On the threshold I encountered a man whose face was reddened by the hanging lamp, and was livid with fury. He scowled at me, murmured an apology, and thrust past me into the alley. "Queer customer," thought I, gazing after him. Meanwhile the voice continued singing; clearer than before, it seemed to me. I boldly entered.

The song was cut off sharp, as with a knife. A terrible silence compassed me about, giving me the impression that I had destroyed something. Gradually my eyes grew accustomed to the dim lighting, and I found that the room was scantily furnished with a little bar at one end, a table, a couple of chairs—obviously a mere waiting-room for the true business of the establishment which went on in the background. Nor was it difficult to guess what the real business was, for along a passage there were many doors, some of them ajar, leading into bedrooms in which beneath deeply shaded lamps double beds were to be discerned. A girl was seated on a bench leaning her elbows on the table; she was heavily made up, and appeared extremely tired. Behind the bar was a blowzy woman, slatternly and fat, with a second girl, a rather pretty lass, at her side. My good evening fell flat, and was not echoed back to me for a considerable time. It was eerie to have stepped into this silence of the desert, and I wished to get clear away. Yet, since there did not seem to be adequate reason for absconding, I took a place at the table and resigned myself to the inevitable.

Suddenly remembering her business in life, the girl

got up and asked me what I wished to drink, and I recognized at once by her guttural pronunciation of the French words that she hailed from Germany. I ordered beer, which she fetched and brought to me, shuffling her feet in slovenly fashion, thus betraying even greater indifference than did her lack-lustre eyes. Following the custom of such haunts, she placed another glass next mine and sat down before it. She raised her glass with a nod of greeting in my direction, but she gazed through and beyond me. I had a good look at her. A beautiful face still, with regular features; but it had grown like a mask, since the inner fires were quenched. There was a touch of coarseness about it, the skin and muscles were lax, the lids heavy, the hair unkempt, and two furrows had already formed on either side of the mouth. Her dress was disorderly, her voice husky from too much smoking and beer-drinking. Here undubitably was a fellow-mortal who was weary unto death, and who only continued living out of long-established habit. Embarrassed and horrified, I asked her a question. She answered without looking at me and scarcely moving her lips. I guessed that my coming was unwelcome. The elder woman behind the bar yawned prodigiously, the younger girl slouched in a corner, as if waiting for me to call her. If I could have got away, I should have done so precipitately. But my limbs were like lead and I sat on, inert, chained by disgust and curiosity, for, to speak frankly, this indifference stirred me strangely.

The girl next me suddenly burst into a fit of shrill laughter. Simultaneously, the flame of the lamp flickered in a draught of cold air coming through the open doorway.

“So you’ve come back,” said the girl in German. “Creeping round the house again, you mean skunk. Oh, come along in—I shan’t do you any harm.”

I turned first to the speaker whose mouth seemed to be

spewing forth fire, and then to the door. Slinking in was the individual who had scuttled away on my entry. He was a cringing creature, holding his hat in his hand like a beggar, trembling under the douche of words that had greeted him, writhing beneath the torrential flow of mirthless laughter, and rendered even more uneasy by the way in which, from behind the bar, the hostess was whispering to the girl.

"Go and sit down beside Françoise," the young woman said hectoringly. "Can't you see I've got a gentleman customer?"

She spoke to him exclusively in the German tongue, while the hostess and the younger girl split their sides with laughter though they could not understand a word she said. The man was evidently a habitué.

"Give him a bottle of champagne, Françoise, the most expensive brand," she yelled mockingly. "And if it's too dear for you, my man, you've only got to stay outside and not come bothering us. You'd like to have me for nothing, I know, and anything else you could get without paying you'd grab. Ugh, you filthy beast."

The tall figure crumbled under the lash of this tongue. Like a whipped cur, he sidled up to the counter and with a trembling hand he poured the wine into a glass. He evidently wanted to look at the slattern who was abusing him, and yet he was unable to lift his gaze from the floor. The lamplight caught his face, and I saw before me an emaciated visage, with damp locks of hair sticking in wisps on the brow. His limbs were slack, as if broken at the joints. He was a pitiable object, devoid of strength and yet not wholly lacking in a kind of vicious courage. Everything about him was askew; and the eyes he raised for a flash did not look straight, but were shifty and full of a wicked light.

"Don't bother about him," said the girl to me in her ponderous French and seizing me roughly by the arm as

though she wanted me to turn away from my contemplation. "It's an old story between him and me. Doesn't date from yesterday!" She bared her teeth like a vixen ready to bite, and snarled: "You just listen to what I tell you, old fox. I'd rather fling myself into the sea than go with you. Got it?"

Again the sally was applauded by shouts of laughter from behind the bar. The pleasantry seemed to be a joy which was daily renewed. Then a horrible thing happened. The younger wench put her arms round the man in simulated affection and caressed him tenderly. He winced under her touch, and glanced at me, anxious and cringing. At the same moment the woman next me threw off her inertia as if she had just awakened from profound sleep, and her countenance was so contorted with malevolence, her hands trembled so violently, that I could bear the scene no longer. Throwing some coins upon the table, I rose to go. But she detained me, saying:

"If he's bothering you, I'll chuck him out, the swine. He's jolly well got to do what he's told. Come, let's drink another glass together."

She pressed up against me with assumed ardour, and I knew at once that she was playing a game in order to torment the man, for she kept on glancing in his direction out of the corner of her eyes. Disgust filled me when I saw how, with every endearment she lavished upon me, the poor wretch shrank together as if branded with a red-hot iron. I could not take my eyes off him, and I shivered when it became evident what a storm of rage, jealousy, and desire was brewing within him. Yet, every time the girl looked towards him, he ducked his head in fear. She sidled closer, and I could feel her body quivering with pleasure as she pursued her wicked game. The scent of cheap powder and unwashed skin was sickening, and in order to keep her at a distance I

took a cigar out of my case. Before I had time to light it, the girl was screaming.

“Here, you, bring a light, and be quick about it.”

It was horrible to make myself a party to her machinations by allowing the man to serve me, and I made what haste I could to find a match for myself. But her orders had already whipped the poor devil into activity, and he shuffled up to the table with the necessary kindling material. Our eyes crossed, and in his I read abysmal shame mingled with pusillanimous bitterness. This look touched a brotherly chord in me and made me vibrate in sympathy with his humiliation. I said in German:

“Thank you, Sir; but you should not have bothered.”

I offered him my hand. He hesitated for a moment, then my fingers were squeezed between his bony fists. Gratitude shone from his eyes during the second he fixed me, but soon he lowered his puffy lids. Defiance made me want to invite him to sit with us, and I had probably made a gesture of invitation for, ere the words dropped from my lips, the woman had said harshly:

“Back to your place, at once, and don’t come bothering round here again.”

I was nauseated by her strident voice and her whole demeanour. Why should I worry my head about this repulsive harlot, this weak-minded wench, this sewer of beer and cheap scent and tobacco-smoke? I longed for a breath of fresh air. I pushed the money towards her, stood up, and, when she tried to detain me with her endearments, I moved resolutely towards the exit. I could not participate in the humiliation of a fellow-creature, and I made it clear to the girl that her charms had no attractions for me. An angry flush spread over her face and neck, fierce words trembled on her lips; but she did not speak. She merely turned to the man and looked at him so meaningly that with the utmost speed

he sought to do her unspoken bidding. His fingers shot down into his pocket, and he drew forth a purse. He was evidently frightened at being left alone with her, and in his excitement fumbled with the opening. I guessed that he was not accustomed to spending money freely, he had none of the generous way of a sailor who flings his coins carelessly about. This man was used to counting money carefully, and to testing the pieces between his fingers before paying them away—as he now paid for his champagne.

“Look how he’s trembling because he has to part with some of his beloved pence,” she cried tauntingly, stepping nearer to him. “Too slow, I tell you. Just wait till I . . .”

He shrank back in fear. When she saw how frightened he was, she shrugged her shoulders and said jeeringly, and with an indescribable expression of disgust on her face:

“I’m not going to take anything away from you. I spit on your money. It is all counted beforehand, I know; never a farthing too much must be allowed to leave your purse. But,” and she tapped him on the chest, “what about the bit of paper you’ve so carefully stitched into your waistcoat lining?”

His hand went to his side as if he were seized with a spasm of the heart. Having felt the place, his face, which had gone ashen pale, resumed its normal hue and his hand dropped away again.

“Miser,” she screamed.

At this the martyr turned, flung the purse and its contents into the younger girl’s lap, and rushed out as if the place were on fire. At first the girl gave a shriek of alarm, then, realizing what the man had done, she broke into peal upon peal of piercing laughter.

The woman stood for a moment rigid, her eyes sparkling with wrath. Then her lids closed, and her body

MOONBEAM ALLEY

went limp. She looked old and tired. A forlorn and dropping figure swayed before me.

"He'll be weeping over his lost money, out there. May even go to the police-station and tell them we've stolen it. To-morrow he'll be here again. But he won't get me, no, that he won't. I'll give myself to anyone who offers, but never to him."

She stepped up to the bar and gulped down a glass of neat brandy. The wickedness still glinted in her eyes but it was misty now as if shining from behind a veil of tears. My gorge rose as I looked at her, so that I could find no compassion in my heart.

"Good evening," I said as I took my leave.

"Bon soir," answered the hostess, without a glance in my direction.

Shrill and mocking laughter followed me into the street.

As I stepped forth into the alley, it seemed to me darker than ever, closed in by the starless sky and the night; but soon the pale moon shone down again, bringing me infinite alleviation. I took a deep breath, and the horror left me. Now I could once more relish the amazing tangle of human destinies; and a feeling of beatitude, akin to tears, filled me at the thought that behind every window fate was waiting, that at the opening of every door an experience was ready for the taking, that the multitudinous happenings of this world are ever present for those who choose to observe them, that even the foulest hovel is bursting with newly generated life like dung filled with the larvæ that will become shining beetles. The unsavoury encounter was no longer repulsive to me. On the contrary, the suspense it had produced in my mind now relaxed into an agreeable sensation of lassitude, and my sole desire was to convert my adventure into beautiful dreams. I cast a

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

searching eye up and down the narrow street, wondering which direction would lead me back to the hotel. A shadow fell across my path.

“Beg pardon, Sir,” said a familiar whining voice in my native tongue, “but I’m afraid you will have some difficulty in finding your way out of the maze. May I act as guide, Sir? Your hotel, Sir?”

I gave him the name.

“Yes, Sir, I know it, Sir. Will you allow me to accompany you, Sir?” he asked apologetically.

A shudder crept over me. It was horrible to have this slouching, ghostlike creature walking by my side, noiselessly, as if on stocking feet. My perception of the gloom in the alleyways of the sailors’ quarter, the memory of my recent experience, were spontaneously replaced by a state of confused reverie. I knew that my companion’s eyes still held the same meek expression, that his lips still twitched nervously, that he wanted to talk. But I did not wish to rouse myself from the inertia of mind which enfolded me, in order to take any active interest in the fellow. He hemmed, words choked in his throat, and I felt a cruel pleasure in not coming to his aid. Repulsion at the recollection of that dreadful woman spread through me like a miasma, and I was glad the man’s shame should be wrestling with his spiritual need for explanation. No, I did not help him; but allowed a heavy curtain of silence to hang black and awesome between us. My footsteps rang out clear and youthful in contrast to his muffled and aged tread. The tension between his soul and mine grew stronger every minute. The silence became strident with unspoken words. At last the string, stretched to breaking-point, snapped, and he blurted out:

“You have . . . you have just witnessed a strange scene, Sir. I beg you to forgive me, Sir, if I refer to it . . . but it must have appeared very peculiar to you, Sir, and

MOONBEAM ALLEY

you must think me a ludicrous fellow, but you see, Sir, that woman . . . well, she is . . . ”

He had got stuck again. His throat worked. Then, in a very small voice, he said hastily:

“She’s my wife, Sir.”

I must have shown surprise, for he hurriedly continued as if wishing to excuse himself.

“That is to say, Sir, she was my wife, five, no four years ago, at Geratzheim in Hesse where I have my home. Please, Sir, you really must not think badly of her. It’s probably my fault that she has become what she is. She was not always thus. But I . . . I teased and plagued her. You see, Sir, I married her in spite of her abject poverty. Why, she had hardly a chemise to her back, nothing, nothing at all. Whereas I am well-to-do, or, rather, I am comfortably off . . . at least I had a pretty competence in those days . . . and I was, perhaps—she is right—I was thrifty . . . yes, I was thrifty even before our great misfortune. But you see, Sir, my father and mother were so, and the whole family a bit on the stingy side. Besides, I worked hard for every penny I earned. She was fond of pretty things, and, being poor, she had nothing but what I gave her. I was constantly reminding her of this. Oh, I know it was wrong of me—I’ve had time to learn that since the catastrophe—for she was proud, very proud. Please don’t run away with the idea that she is naturally of such a disposition as you witnessed this evening. Far from it, Sir; that’s all make-believe. She hurts herself in order to make me suffer, in order to torture me, and because she is ashamed of her own doings, of her present mode of life. Maybe she has gone to the bad, but I . . . I refuse to accept such a notion . . . for I remember how good, how very good she used to be, Sir.”

His excitement made him pause, both in speech and walk, while he wiped his eyes. I looked at him in spite of

myself. He no longer appeared to be a figure of fun, and I was no longer annoyed by his constant repetition of the obsequious "Sir." The energy he had put into phrasing his explanation had transfigured his countenance. We started forward again, and he kept his eyes downcast as if reading his story printed upon the pavement. He sighed heavily, and his voice took on a sonorous tone very different from the querulous sound I had come to expect from him.

"Yes, Sir, she was good—good, and kind to me as well—she was grateful for having been raised out of her misery. I knew how thankful she was . . . but I wanted to hear her say so . . . always and always again . . . I could not listen too often to the verbal expression of her gratitude. You see, Sir, it is so wonderful to feel that someone considers you to be better than you really are. I would willingly have parted with all my money just to hear her say those few words, everlastingly renewed . . . but she had her proper pride, and she found it increasingly difficult to acknowledge her debt to me, especially when I made a claim upon her in the matter and almost ordered her point-blank to pronounce the words I longed to hear. . . . And so, Sir, I insisted that she ask me for everything she wanted, for every dress, for every scrap of ribbon. . . . Three years I tortured her thus, and her martyrdom grew worse as the time went by. And believe me, Sir, it was all because I loved her so desperately. I loved her proud bearing, and yet I wished to humiliate her. Oh, fool that I was! I pretended to be vexed when she asked for a hat, or any other trifle she took a fancy for; while all the time I was in the seventh heaven of delight at being given an opportunity to gratify her—and at the same time to make her eat humble-pie. In those days, Sir, I did not realize how dear she was to me. . . ."

Again he stopped, and reeled in his gait. He had for-

gotten my existence; and spoke henceforward as if in a hypnotic trance.

"I only discovered how greatly I loved her on the day—the accursed day—when she begged me to give her something to help her mother out of a difficulty, and I refused. It was an insignificant sum. . . . I had actually put the money aside for the purpose . . . but I longed for her to ask me again . . . and then, when I came home I found a letter on the table and learned that she had gone. . . . All she wrote was: 'Keep your damned money. I'll never ask you for another penny.' That's all. Nothing more. I was like one demented for three days and three nights. I had the river dragged and the forest scoured; indeed I paid hundreds over to the authorities in the hope of discovering her whereabouts. I even confided my troubles to the neighbours—but they merely laughed me to scorn. No trace, no trace at all. Months later, I learned that someone had seen her in the train, accompanied by a soldier . . . a train going to Berlin. That very day I went to the capital, leaving my business to take care of itself. Thousands did I lose in the process. My farm labourers, my manager, my . . . oh, everyone profited by my absence to line his pockets. But I assure you, Sir, I remained indifferent to these losses . . . I stayed a week in Berlin . . . and, at last, I found her. . . ."

He panted slightly, and then continued:

"I assure you, Sir, I never said a harsh word to her . . . I wept . . . I knelt before her . . . I offered her anything she pleased. . . . She would henceforward be the mistress of all I possessed—for I had come to realize that life without her was impossible. . . . I loved every hair on her head, her mouth, her body, every part and particle of her being. I bribed the landlady (she was, in fact, a procuress, what they call a 'white-slave trader') generously and thus managed to see poor Lise alone. Her

face was like chalk; but she listened to me, oh, Sir, I believe she really listened to me as if pleased, pleased to see me. But when I began to speak of the money it was necessary to pay—and after all, Sir, you will agree that we were obliged to discuss such practical issues—she merely called her fancy-man on to the scene, and the two of them laughed me out of countenance. I did not lose sight of her, Sir, but returned to the charge day after day. The other lodgers told me that the cur had left her, utterly unprovided for. So I sought her out yet again; but she tore up the notes I gave her, and the next time I came—she was gone. Oh, Sir, you can have no idea of what I did to trace her. I followed her for a year, paying agents here and agents there. At last I discovered that she had gone to Argentina . . . and . . . and . . . that she was in . . . a house . . . of ill-fame. . . .”

Again he hesitated, and the last two words seemed to stick in his throat. His voice became sombre as he went on:

“At first I could hardly believe my ears . . . then I reflected that I was to blame, I, only I, because I had humiliated her. And I thought how terribly she must be suffering, she so proud, as I well knew her to be. I got my solicitor to write to the consul out there, and I sent money. But she was not to be told from whom it came. The sum was more than sufficient to bring her home again. Soon I got a cable that the scheme had worked, and that the boat would reach Amsterdam on such a date. Well, so great was my impatience that I got there three days too soon. When I saw the smoke in the distance, it seemed to me I could not wait till the ship slowly entered port and came alongside the quay. At last I caught a glimpse of her at the tail of the other passengers, hardly recognizable at first, so heavily was she made up. When she saw me waiting for her, she blanched even under her paint, and tottered so that two

sailors had to support her. No sooner had she stepped on to land than I was at her side. I could not speak, my throat felt so dry. She, too, said nothing, and did not look at me. I motioned to a porter to carry the luggage, and we started for the hotel. Suddenly she turned to me and said . . . oh, Sir, if you could have heard her voice, so sad, I thought my heart would break . . . 'Do you want me still as your wife, after . . . ?' I could only clasp her hand. . . . She trembled violently, but spoke no more. I felt that now all would be well. . . . Ah, Sir, how happy I was. When we got to our room, I danced for joy, I knelt at her feet babbling out the most absurd things—at least I fancy my words must have been rather funny, for she smiled through her tears and stroked my hair—hesitatingly, of course. Her endearments did me good, my heart overflowed. I rushed up and down stairs ordering dinner—I called it our wedding feast. I helped her to change her dress, and then we went down and ate and drank, a merry meal I assure you, Sir. She was like a child, so warm and affectionate, speaking of our home and how everything would start fresh. . . . Then . . ."

The man's voice became rasping, and he made a gesture as if he were strangling someone.

"Then . . . the waiter . . . a mean and vulgar cur . . . believed me to be the worse for drink because I laughed so much and had carried on in such a boyish fashion—and all because I was so happy, oh, so happy. . . . Well, I paid the bill and he, as I said, thinking me drunk, cheated me out of twenty francs in giving me the change. I called the fellow back, and demanded my due. He looked sheepish, and laid the money by my plate. . . . Then . . . quite suddenly . . . Lise began to laugh. I stared at her perplexed . . . and her face was completely changed . . . mocking, hard, angry. 'The same as ever . . . even after our wedding feast,' she said

coldly—and yet her voice was full of pity. I cursed myself for having been so particular . . . but I tried to laugh the matter off. . . . Her gaiety had disappeared . . . it was dead and gone. . . . She insisted upon being given a separate room. . . . I was in a mood to grant every request . . . and lay alone, open-eyed, through the night, thinking what I should get her on the morrow . . . a handsome gift, that would show her I was no longer stingy . . . at least where she was concerned. Early next morning I was abroad . . . I bought a bracelet . . . and took it to her in her room . . . but she was no longer there . . . she had gone . . . as she had gone before. I looked round for a note . . . praying it would not be there, yet knowing that it would inevitably be awaiting me . . . and there it was, sure enough, on the dressing-table . . . and on it was scribbled . . . ”

He hesitated. I stood still, looking into his martyred face. The man bowed his head, and whispered hoarsely:

“She had written . . . ‘Leave me in peace. You are utterly repulsive to me.’ ”

Our walk had led us to the harbour; and, in the distance, the silence was broken by the roar of the Atlantic breakers on the coast. The vessels, their lights shining like the eyes of huge animals, swung at their anchors. A song floated to me from afar. Nothing was very clear. I seemed to feel presences rather than see them. The town was sleeping and dreaming an immense dream. By my side I distinguished the ghostly shadow of the man growing uncannily large and then dwindling to dwarfed proportions in the flickering lamplight. I was not inclined to speak, or to offer consolation, or to ask questions. The silence stuck to me, heavy and oppressive. Suddenly he seized my arm, and said quaveringly:

“But I’m determined not to leave this town without her. . . . After many months of search I found her. . . . I

am invulnerable to the martyrdom she is putting me through. . . . I beseech you, Sir, to have a word with her . . . she refuses to listen if I speak . . . I must get her to come back. . . . Oh, won't you tell her she ought to? Please, Sir, have a try. . . . I can't go on living like this. I can't bear any longer to see other men go in there, knowing she is giving herself to them, while I wait in the street till they come down again, laughing and tipsy. The whole neighbourhood knows me by now, and the people make mock of me when they see me waiting out on the pavement. . . . I shall go mad, but I must keep my vigil without fail. . . . Oh, Sir, I do beg of you to speak to her. . . . You are a stranger, I know, but for God's sake, Sir, have a word with her. Someone from her own country might influence her in this foreign land."

I wished to free my arm from the man's convulsive grip. Loathing and disgust alienated my sympathies. When he felt that I was trying to get away, he flung himself on to his knees in the middle of the street and clasped my legs.

"I conjure you, Sir, to speak to her; you must, you must—or something terrible will happen. All my money's gone in tracing her, and I'm not going to leave her here . . . not alive. I've bought a knife. Yes, Sir, I've got a knife. I won't let her stay here; at least not alive; I could not bear it. Oh, speak to her, Sir, I beg and pray you to have a talk with her. . . ."

He crouched like a maniac before me. At that moment two policemen turned into the street. I dragged him violently to his feet. He looked at me blankly for a moment, and then said in an utterly changed voice:

"Take the first turning on your right, and the hotel is about half-way down."

Once more he stared at me with eyes wherein the

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

pupils seemed to have melted away into a bleak, white void. Then he vanished.

I hugged myself in my coat, for I was shivering. I was tired; and sleep, a kind of drunken sleep, black and feelingless, claimed me. I wanted to think, to turn these things over in my mind, but sleep was ruthless and would not be put off. I got to my hotel, fell on to the bed, and slept like an animal.

In the morning it was hard to disentangle dream from reality, and something within me urged me not to try and find out. I woke late, a stranger in a strange city, and visited a church far-famed for its mosaics. But my eyes were blind to such sights. The night's adventure rose vividly before my mind, and unconsciously my feet sought that alley-way and that house. But such thoroughfares do not become alive until after dark. During the daytime they wear cold, grey masks, and it is only those who know them well who are able to recognize one from another. Search as I might, I did not find the street I wanted. Weary and disappointed I returned to the hotel, followed by pictures that were either the figment of a disordered brain, or the remembrance of reality.

The train was scheduled to leave at nine o'clock that evening. I felt sorry to quit. A porter carried my bags to the station. Then, at a crossing, I recognized the street leading to that house. Telling the man to wait a minute, I went to cast a final glance at the site of my adventure, leaving the fellow smirking in a knowing way.

Yes, here it was, dark as last night, with the moonlight shining on the window-panes, and outlining the door. I was drawing nearer, when a figure emerged from the shadows. I recognized the German cowering on the threshold. He beckoned for me to approach. But mingled horror and fear made me take to my heels. I did not wish to be delayed, and to miss my train.

MOONBEAM ALLEY

At the corner I turned for another look. As my eyes fell upon the poor devil, he sprang up and made for the entry. He pushed the door open, and a piece of metal shone in his hand. Was it money or a knife-blade that glittered so treacherously in the moonbeams?

TRANSFIGURATION



IN the autumn of 1914, Baron Friedrich Michael von G., an officer in a dragoon regiment, was killed in action at Rawaruska. Among the papers in his desk at home was found a sealed packet which contained the following story. The relatives of the deceased, judging by the title and by a fugitive glance at the text, regarded it as a first attempt at fiction, and handed it over to me for examination, with authority to publish it if I thought fit. My own belief is that it is not a work of fiction at all, but an account of actual experiences. I therefore publish it as a human document, making neither alterations nor additions, but concealing the author's identity.

It suddenly occurred to me to-day that I should like to write an account of my experiences during that queer night, so that I might be able to survey the whole course of events in their natural sequence. Ever since this fancy seized me, I have been dominated by an inexplicable impulse to pen the record of my adventures, although I doubt whether I shall find it possible to give an adequate impression of the strangeness of the occurrences. I have no artistic talent, no practice as a writer. My only attempts at authorship have been one or two humorous trifles written during my school days. I do not even know whether a special technique has been worked out in such matters; whether the aspirant to authorship can be taught the best way of producing a coherent account

of the succession of outward things and their simultaneous reflexion in the mind. I am even dubious whether I shall be able to fit the meaning to the word and the word to the meaning, and thus to secure the balance which has always seemed to me characteristic of the style of the successful novelist. However, I am writing only for myself, and with no thought of making intelligible to others what I myself find it difficult enough to understand. My aim is merely to settle accounts, as it were, with certain happenings in which I was strongly interested and by which I was greatly moved—to look upon these happenings as objectively as possible. I have never told the story of the incidents to any of my friends. I was withheld from doing so, partly by my doubt whether I could make them understand the essence of what occurred, and partly because I was a little ashamed at having been so profoundly affected by a chance happening. The whole thing was no more than a petty experience. And yet, even as I write these words, I realize how difficult it is for the prentice hand to choose the right words; I understand how much ambiguity is implicit in the simplest syllables. When I describe the experience as "petty," of course I mean this only in a relative sense, in contrast with the mighty and dramatic experiences in which whole nations and manifold destinies are involved; and I also use the term in a temporal sense, seeing that all the adventures I am going to relate took place within six hours. Nevertheless, for me personally, this experience, however petty, insignificant, and unimportant from a detached and general viewpoint, was so momentous that even to-day—four months after that queer night—I am still burning with it, and burning to tell the story. Daily and hourly I turn over the details in my mind, for that night has become, as it were, the axis of my whole existence; everything I do and say is unconsciously determined by

TRANSFIGURATION

it; I think of nothing else; I am always trying to recapitulate its sudden happenings, and thus to ensure my grasp of them. Indeed, I now realize what was still hidden from me when I took up my pen ten minutes ago, that my sole object in writing this account of the incidents is that I may hold them fast, may have them so to speak concretized before me, may again enjoy their rehearsal at once emotionally and intellectually. I was mistaken when I said that I wanted to settle accounts with these memories by writing them down. The fact is that I want to have a livelier picture of what was all-too-fugitive at the time when it was lived through; I want a warm and breathing picture of them, which will make them real to me for ever. Not, indeed, that I am afraid for a moment of forgetting that sultry afternoon, or the queer night that followed. I need no memento, no milestones, to mark my course during those hours. Like a sleep walker, I move with an assured tread through those memories, whether of the day or of the night; I see the most trivial details with the clarity proper to the heart rather than to our fallible intellectual memory. I could sketch on this paper the outline of every leaf in the green spring landscape; and now, in autumn, I can still fancy myself smelling the soft and pollen-laden odour of the chestnut blossoms. If, therefore, I write this record, and thus recapitulate those hours, I do so, not in fear lest I should forget them, but in sheer delight at the recapitulation. And when I attempt to describe the exact succession of events, I shall have to keep a tight hand on myself, for whenever I recall them I am seized with a kind of intoxication, an ecstasy of feeling, so that I find it hard to steady the flow of memories, and to keep the incidents from becoming merged in a motley confusion. So passionate, still, are my impressions when I recall that day, June 8, 1913, on which I took a ab. . . .

Once more I feel the need to curb my pen, for I am startled when I note the ambiguity of words. Now that for the first time I am trying to write a connected account of what took place, I realize how hard it is to give a fixed presentation of that perpetual flux we call life. I wrote that "I" did so and so, that "I" took the cab on June 8, 1913. But the very pronoun is ambiguous, for I have long ceased to be the "I" of that eighth of June, although only four months have passed since then; although I live in the house that used to belong to that "I," sit at his desk, and hold his pen in my hand. I have long since become distinguished from the man of that day, and above all on account of the experiences I am about to describe. I see him from without, dispassionately and with an alien eye. I can describe him as I might describe a friend or companion of whom I knew a great deal, but who was an essentially different entity from myself—one of whom I could speak, one whom I could praise or blame, without feeling for a moment that he had once belonged to me.

The man I then was differed but little either in externals or internals, from other members of his class—from the people who, without any overweening sense of pride, are wont to think of themselves as "good society." I was thirty-five years old. My parents died shortly before I came of age, and had left me fairly well off, so that there was no question of my having to earn a livelihood or of having to carve out a career for myself. Their death thus relieved me of the need for making a decision, which had been worrying me a good deal. I had just finished my university studies, and it had become incumbent on me to choose a profession. Family connections, and my own leanings towards a tranquil, secure, and meditative life, had made it likely that I should enter the higher civil service; but I was my parents' sole heir, and I found that my means would

TRANSFIGURATION

now enable me to lead an independent existence and to gratify all my wishes. I had never been troubled with ambition, so I decided to spend a few years seeing life, and to defer the possibility of taking up some more active occupation should any prove sufficiently enticing. Ultimately, I remained content with this life of watching and waiting, for I found that, since my wishes were modest, I coveted nothing I was not able to get. In the easy and pleasant life of Vienna, which excels all other capitals in the charm of its promenades, its opportunities for idle contemplation, its elegance, and its artistry—all combining to form a life which seems a sufficient end in itself—I forgot to think of more strenuous activities. I enjoyed all the pleasantries open to a rich, good-looking and unambitious young man of family: the harmless tension of mild gambling, sport, travel, and the like. But soon I began to supplement this sort of existence by the cultivation of artistic tastes. I collected rare glass, not so much out of a special fondness for it, as because it was easy to acquire connoisseurship in this restricted field. I adorned the walls of my rooms with Italian engravings in the rococo style, and with landscapes of the Canaletto school, sometimes getting them from dealers, and sometimes buying them at auctions where I luxuriated in the gentle excitement of the bidding. I made a point of attending performances of good music, and frequented the studios of our best painters. Nor were successes with women lacking to round off my experience. In this field, likewise, impelled by the collector's secret urge (which ever denotes the lack of sufficient occupation), I enjoyed many memorable hours, and gradually became a true connoisseur. On the whole, my time was well filled, and my life seemed a satisfying one. I grew increasingly fond of this luke-warm and easy-going atmosphere of days that were always interesting and never agitating; and I was

rarely moved by any new desires, for, in these peaceful surroundings, trifles brought me sufficient joy. The successful choice of a necktie, the purchase of a fine book, a motoring excursion, or an hour with a woman, would brim the measure of my happiness. An especial delight to me was the fact that my existence resembled a suit perfectly cut by an English tailor, in that there was nothing unduly striking about it. I believe my friends liked me well enough and were always glad to see me. Most of my acquaintances regarded me as a lucky fellow.

I really cannot remember whether this man of an earlier day whom I have been trying to describe also regarded himself as a lucky fellow; for now when, thanks to my crucial experience, I demand of every feeling that it shall have a deeper and more adequate significance, the appraisement of my earlier feelings has become almost impossible. But I am certain that I was not unhappy in those days. Practically all my wishes were gratified, all my claims on life fulfilled. But the very fact that I was accustomed to get all I wanted, and to make no further demands of fate, had as its inevitable sequel the growth of a sense that life was a rather flaccid affair. Unconscious, or half-realized, longings were at work. Not genuine wishes, but the wish for wishes; the desire to have stronger, less perfectly controlled, more ambitious, and less readily satisfied, desires; the longing to live more fully, and perhaps also the longing to suffer. By too admirably designed a technique, I had cleared all resistances out of my path, and the lack of resistances was sapping my vitality. I noticed that desire stirred in me less often and less vigorously; that a sort of stagnation had ensued in my feelings; that I was suffering (how can I best phrase it?) from a spiritual impotence, from an incapacity to grasp life with all the ardour of passion. Let me mention some

TRANSFIGURATION

little signs which first brought this lack home to me. I noticed that I often had no inclination to go to the theatre to see some noted performance; that I would order books about which everyone was talking, and then leave them uncut for weeks; and that, though I continued, automatically, to enrich my collections of glass and pictures, I no longer troubled to find the proper place for new acquisitions, and no longer felt any particular pleasure when I at length happened upon some object of which I had long been in search.

But the first time when I became fully aware of this transitional and slight decline in mental energy is still clearly present to my mind. It was in the summer. Simply from that strange disinclination to exert myself, and from the failure to be attracted by any new possibility, I had remained in Vienna. At this juncture I received a letter from a woman with whom I had been on intimate terms for three years, and with whom I honestly believed myself to be in love. The epistle was long and impassioned—it ran to fourteen pages. She told me that she had recently made the acquaintance of a man who had become all in all to her. She intended to marry him in the autumn, and must therefore break off relationships with me. She had no thought of regretting the experiences we had shared; the memory of them was a delight to her; the thought of me would accompany her in her new marriage as the sweetest thought of her life hitherto; she hoped that I would forgive her for this sudden decision. After the circumstantial opening, she went on to adjure me not to despise her, and not to suffer at being thus cast off. I was to make no attempt to hold her back, nor was I to do anything foolish as far as I myself was concerned. I was to seek consolation elsewhere; I was to write to her instantly, for she would be consumed with anxiety until she heard from me. In a

pencilled postscript she added: "Don't do anything rash! Understand and forgive!"

The first time I read this letter, I was simply surprised at the news. But when I reread it, I became aware of a certain sense of shame, which, as I realized its meaning, rapidly increased to a feeling of positive alarm. For I could not detect within myself any of those strong and natural sentiments which my mistress had anticipated. There was not a trace of them. Her communication had caused me no pain. I had not felt angry with her, nor had I dreamed for a moment of any act of violence against either her or myself. Such coldness was so strange that it could not but frighten me. I was to lose one who had been my intimate for many years; a woman whose warm, soft body I had clasped in my arms, and whose gentle breathing I had rejoiced to hear when she lay beside me at night—but nothing stirred in me at the news, I had no impulse to resist, no longing to reassert my conquest. My emotions showed not a sign of that which her instincts had led her to expect as a matter of course from a real man. This was the first thing to make me fully alive to the process of stagnation within me. Or, I might be said to be drifting, rudderless, on the surface of a stream. I knew that there was something dead, something corpse-like, about this coldness. There was not, as yet, the foul odour of corruption; but there was the hopeless apathy of waning life, the apathy of the moment that precedes bodily death and the consequent obvious decay.

Thenceforward I began to watch this remarkable stagnation of feeling, as a patient watches the progress of his disease. Shortly afterwards, one of my men friends died. An intimate of my childhood's days passed out of my life for ever. At the graveside I asked myself whether I was truly a mourner, whether I felt any active sense of loss. There was no such feeling. I

TRANSFIGURATION

seemed to be made of glass; to be something through which things became visible, without forming part of it. However earnestly, on this and similar occasions, I might strive to feel, however excellent the reasons I might bring forward to convince myself that I ought to feel, there was no response from within. Men were lost to me, women came and went; and I was myself moved by these movements as little as one who sits in a room is moved by raindrops on the window-pane. There was a transparent partition between me and the immediate things of life, a partition which I had not the strength to shatter.

Nevertheless, this clear realization brought, in the long run, no anxiety in its train; for, as I have already explained, I was indifferent even to the things that touched me closely. Sorrow itself was no longer sharp enough. My spiritual lack was no more perceptible to my associates than the sexual impotence that is revealed only in the intimate hour is perceptible to a man's ordinary associates. In social life I often aroused astonishment by an artificial fervour, by a parade of emotional interest designed to conceal my inward apathy. To all appearance, I continued to live the old, easy-going, unhampered life. Weeks and months slipped away, and the months slowly lengthened into years. One morning I noticed in the glass that my temples were tinged with grey, and I realized that my youth was preparing to take light. But what others term "youth" had departed from me long ere this. The loss of youth was not particularly distressing to me, for I had not valued it moderately. I had no special interest even in myself.

Thanks to this apathy, my days became more and more monotonous, despite all outward differences in occupation and incident. They followed one another in an undistinguished series, growing and then fading like

the leaves on a tree. Nor was there any distinguishing mark about the beginning of the day I am about to describe. It seemed one just like another. That morning, June 8, 1913, I had got up rather late, for a lingering memory of my school days always inclined me to lie abed on Sunday morning. After I had had my tub and had glanced at the newspapers, I was lured out-of-doors by the warmth of the day. As usual, I strolled down Graben, nodding to acquaintances and exchanging a word with one here and there. I dropped in at a friend's house to luncheon. I had no engagements that afternoon, for I liked to keep Sunday afternoon free, and to dispose of it when the time came as fancy might dictate. When I left my friend's house and crossed the Ringstrasse, I had a lively sense of the beauty of the sunlit town, and was delighted with its charm that afternoon in early summer. Everyone looked cheerful. People were rejoicing in the Sundayfied aspect of the gay thoroughfare; I was myself struck by many of the details, and especially by the contrast of the spreading green foliage with the asphalt of the pavement. Although I walked this way almost every day, the sight of the crowd in its Sunday best came upon me as a surprise, and involuntarily I began to long for more verdure, more brightness, and an even more diversified colouring. I felt a curiosity to see the Prater, where now at the close of spring and the beginning of summer the great trees stood like rows of giant green-liveried footmen on either side of the main alley-way thronged with carriages—the huge trees silently proffering their white blossoms to the smartly dressed loiterers. Being wont to yield to such trivial impulses, I hailed the first cab that passed, and told the driver to take me to the Prater.

"To the races, Herr Baron?" he asked with polite alacrity.

This reminded me that to-day was, indeed, a fashion-

TRANSFIGURATION

able race-day, when all Vienna would turn up to the show. "That's queer!" I thought, as I stepped into the cab. "A few years ago I could not possibly have forgotten that this was race-day!"

My forgetfulness made me realize, like an invalid who has to move an aching limb, the full significance of the apathy with which I was afflicted.

The main avenue was almost empty when we arrived. The racing must have begun some time before. Instead of the usual throng of carriages, there were only a few isolated cabs rattling along at top speed. My coachman turned half-round on his box to ask whether he, too, should whip up. But I told him to drive quietly, as I was in no hurry. I had seen too many races and race-course frequenters to care whether I arrived early or late. In my lethargic mood I enjoyed the gentle swaying of the cab, which gave me the sensation of being cradled in a ship. Driving slowly, I could get a better view of the lovely chestnut blossoms, from which the petals were dropping here and there to become the sport of the breeze, in whose warm eddies they were tossed for a while until they fell to join those that already flecked the ground with white. It was agreeable to me to close my eyes and breathe this spring atmosphere, and to feel that there was no reason for pressing onwards towards the goal. I was disappointed when the cab drew up at the entrance to the racecourse. I was half inclined to turn back, and to be content with another hour's cradling, this pleasant afternoon. But here I was at my destination. A confused uproar came from the course, like the noise of a sea surging within the enclosure. The crowd from which this noise came was not yet visible to me; and involuntarily I was reminded how at Ostend, when one is walking from the lower part of the town up any of the little side alleys to the esplanade, one can already feel the bite of salt in the air and hear the murmur of the

sea before being greeted by the view over the grey expanse where the waves thunder on the shore.

The uproar showed that a race was actually being run, but between me and the course was a motley crowd shaken as if by a convulsion. All the phases of the race were betrayed by the varying moods of the onlookers. This particular race must now be well advanced. The horses could no longer be galloping in a bunch, but must be strung out along the course, with a keen competition for the lead; those who were watching that which I could not see were giving tongue in their excitement to the name of this horse or that. The direction of their heads showed me which part of the track was now the centre of interest, for all had their eyes fixed upon a spot to me invisible. The cries from thousands of throats united into a single clamour growing ever louder, filling the whole place and rising into the impassive heaven. I looked more closely at the faces of a few individuals. They were distorted, almost frenzied; eyes were fixed and gleaming, lips compressed, chins thrust out, nostrils working. To me, a dispassionate observer, the sight of this uncontrolled intoxication was at once ludicrous and horrible. On a bench near by was standing a smartly dressed man, whose face was doubtless amiable as a rule, but now he looked like one possessed by the devil. He was thrashing the air with his walking stick, as if flogging a horse, and his whole body was imitating the movements of a man riding hell-for-leather. His heels beat rhythmically on the bench as if he were rising in stirrups, and with the stick in his right hand he continued to flog the void, while in his left hand he was gripping a white betting slip. Everywhere I saw these white slips; they showed up like flecks of foam upon the noisy flood. Now several horses must be passing the curve neck and neck, for their names were thundered like battle-cries by various groups of persons who would

TRANSFIGURATION

have been overwhelmed by their delirious excitement but for this outlet in shouting.

Amid the frenzied uproar I was as unmoved as a rock amid the breakers, and I find it difficult to give a precise account of my sensations. Pre-eminently, no doubt, I was struck by the utter absurdity of so much excitement, was inspired with ironical contempt for the vulgarity with which it was displayed. But I had unwillingly to admit that there was a spice of another feeling; that I was not free from envy of such ardency of passion, and of the vigorous life which the passion disclosed. What, I wondered, could stir me like this? What could throw me into a fever of excitement, could make my body burn, could force me to utter such involuntary shouts? I could not think of any sum of money that could move me so keenly, or of any woman who could stir my feelings to such a pitch. There was nothing in the world that could thus fire my dead emotions. If a pistol were at my head, a moment before the trigger was pulled, my heart would not throb as the hearts of these thousands and tens of thousands were throbbing because of a handful of money.

But now one of the horses must have been close to the winning post, for from a myriad throats came, ever louder, the cry of one name, the sound breaking at last into a roar. The band began to play, and the throng scattered. One of the races was over, one of the contests decided, and the tension relaxed into a lively animation. What had a moment before been an ardent integration of passion, broke up into groups of individuals, laughing, talking, and hurrying to and fro. The mask of maniacal excitement gave place to a tranquil expression. Social groups were crystallized out of the undifferentiated mass which, so recently, had been united by the passion for sport. I recognized acquaintances, and exchanged greetings with them, but most of those

present were strangers to me and to one another, and they contemplated one another civilly but indifferently. The women appraised one another's dresses; the men looked ardently at the women; the well-bred curiosity, which is the chief occupation of the idle rich class, was at work once more; people sampled one another in point of smartness, and looked to see who was present and who had stayed away. Though they had but just recovered from their frenzy, they were now in doubt whether this interlude or the racing itself was the main purpose of their social encounter. I strolled through the crowd, well pleased to breathe its atmosphere, for it was, after all, the atmosphere of my own daily life; I enjoyed the aroma of smartness that emanated from this kaleidoscopic medley—but still more enjoyable was the gentle breeze from the meadows and the woods which from time to time stirred the white muslin dresses of the women. Some of my acquaintances wanted to talk to me; Diana, the pretty actress, beckoned to me from where she was sitting; but I paid no heed. I did not want to converse with these fashionable folk. It would have bored me to see myself in their mirror. All I desired was to study the spectacle of life, to watch the excitements of the hour—for, to the non-participant, the excitement of others is the most agreeable of spectacles.

A couple of handsome women passed me, and I looked at them with bold eyes (though inwardly unmoved by desire), amused to note in them a mingling of embarrassment at being thus regarded and pleasure at attracting my attention. In reality, they had no particular charm for me. It merely gratified me to simulate an interest, and to arouse their interest, for with me as with so many whose passions are lukewarm, my chief erotic enjoyment was to arouse warmth and uneasiness in others rather than to feel the stirring of my own blood. Thus, as I walked up and down the enclosure, I glanced

TRANSFIGURATION

at the women and received their glances in return, with no sentiment beneath the surface of things, and but mildly titillated by the sheer pleasure of the sport.

Even this palled on me ere long. I passed the same people again and again, and grew weary of their faces and their gestures. Seeing a vacant chair, I sat down. A fresh turmoil was beginning to animate the concourse, a restlessness was increasingly apparent among those who passed by. Obviously a new race was about to begin. This mattered nothing to me. I sat musing, and watched the smoke-wreaths from my cigarette, watched them disperse as they rose into the blue sky. Now came the real beginning of that unprecedented experience which still influences my life. I know the exact instant, for it happened that I had just looked at my watch. The hands, as I saw, glancing lackadaisically, were exactly over one another; it was just after a quarter past three on that afternoon of June 8, 1913. I was looking at the white dial, immersed in childish contemplation of this triviality, when behind me I heard the laughter of a woman, the bright and somewhat agitated laughter I so dearly love in women—laughter that issues from the burning bush of voluptuousness. I had an impulse to turn my head that I might see this woman whose vocalized sensuality had broken in upon my careless reverie like a white pebble thrown into the dark waters of a stagnant pool; but I controlled the desire. An inclination for a harmless pyschological experiment, one I was fond of performing, held the impulse in check. I did not wish to look at this laughing woman yet; I wanted to set my imagination to work upon her, to equip her in my fancy with a face, a mouth, a neck, a swelling breast. I wanted to picture the whole living and breathing woman.

She was close behind me. Her laugh ended, she began to talk. I listened attentively. She spoke with a slight

Hungarian accent, quickly and vivaciously, enunciating the vowels with a rich intonation like that of a singer. It amused me to fit the speech into my fancy picture, to add this to all the other details. I gave her dark hair and dark eyes; a rather large and sensuously curved mouth with strong and very white teeth; a small and finely chiselled nose, but with wide, sensitive nostrils. On her left cheek I gave her a patch. In one hand she carried a riding switch, and flicked her skirt with it as she laughed. She continued to speak, and each word served to enrich my fancy picture with a new detail. She must have small and virginal breasts; she must be wearing a dark green dress fastened with a diamond clasp, and a light-coloured hat with a white plume. The picture grew plainer and plainer, and I felt as if this strange woman, invisible behind my back, must be brightly imaged in the pupils of my eyes. But I would not turn round. Some stirrings of desire were interwoven with my vision. I closed my eyes and waited, certain that, when I opened them and turned to look at her, the reality would confirm my fancy.

At this moment, she stepped forward. Involuntarily I opened my eyes—and was extremely annoyed. It was all wrong. Everything was different, maliciously different, from my fancy picture. She was wearing a white gown instead of a green; was not slender, but deep of bosom and broad of hip; there was not a sign, on her plump cheeks, of the patch I had expected; the hair that showed from beneath her helmet-shaped hat was auburn instead of black. None of the details were right. She was handsome indeed—strikingly so; but, my psychologist's vanity being pricked, I was loath to admit the fact. I looked at her almost malevolently; and yet, in spite of myself, I recognized her wanton charm, perceived the attractive animalism of her firm but soft contour. Now she laughed aloud once more, showing

TRANSFIGURATION

her strong white teeth, and it was plain to me that her ardent and sensuous laughter was in keeping with the pervading luxuriance of her aspect. Everything about her was vehement and challenging; her well-rounded figure; the way she thrust out her chin when she laughed; her penetrating glance; her imperious nose; the hand with which she held her sunshade firmly planted on the ground. Here was elemental femininity, primal energy, deliberate witchery, a beacon of voluptuousness made flesh. Standing beside her was a dapper and somewhat wizened army officer, who was talking to her in emphatic tones. She listened to him, smiled, laughed, made the appropriate responses. But this was mere by-play. The whole time she was drinking in her surroundings eagerly. She drew the notice, the smiles, of all who passed by, and especially of the males among them. Her restless glance wandered over the grand stand, lighting up from time to time as she recognized an acquaintance; then, still listening smilingly and yet indifferently to her companion, she gazed to right and to left. But her eyes never lighted on me, for I was hidden from her by her squire. This piqued me. I rose to my feet, but still she did not see me. I moved nearer—now she was looking back at the grand stand. Resolutely I stepped quite close, raised my hat, and offered her my chair. She glanced at me in some surprise; her eyes twinkled; her lips formed themselves into a caressive smile. With a laconic word of thanks, she accepted the chair, but did not sit down. She merely rested her shapely hand on the back of the chair, thus leaning forward slightly, to show off her figure to better advantage.

Annoyance at my false anticipations had been forgotten. I thought only of the little game I was playing with this woman. I moved back to the wall of the grand stand, to a spot from which I could look at her freely

without attracting too much notice. She became aware of the fixity of my gaze and turned a little towards me, but inconspicuously, as if it had been a chance movement; not repelling my mute advances; answering them occasionally in a non-committal way. Unceasingly her eyes roved from point to point; nothing held her attention longer than a moment. Did she smile with any special meaning when her glance rested on me? I could not feel sure, and the doubt irritated me. In the intervals, when the flashlight of her errant gaze met mine, her expression seemed full of promise; and yet she indiscriminately countered the interest of everyone else in like manner, it would seem, to gratify her coquetry; just as at the same time she appeared to be giving due heed to her friend's conversation. There was something saucy in this ostentation. Was she a confirmed flirt? Was she stirred by a surplus of animal passion? I drew a step nearer, for I had been infected by her sauciness. I no longer looked her in the eyes, but deliberately appraised the outlines of her form. She followed the direction of my glance, and showed no sign of embarrassment. A smile fluttered round the corners of her mouth, as if at some observation of the chattering officer, and, nevertheless, I felt sure that the smile was really an answer to me. Then, when I was looking at her foot as it peeped from beneath her white dress, she, too, looked down carelessly, and, a moment later, as if by chance, lifted the foot and rested it on the rung of the chair, so that, through the slit of her directoire skirt, her leg was exposed to the knee. At this moment, the smile with which she looked at her companion seemed to have an ironical or quizzical flavour. It was obvious that she was playing with me as unconcernedly as I with her. The boldness and subtlety of her technique aroused in me an admiration that was not free from dislike; for while, with a deceitful furtiveness, she was displaying to me the

TRANSFIGURATION

charms of her body, she was fully responsive to the whispered conversation of her gallant—was playing with us both at once. I was soured, for I detested in others this cold and calculating sensuality, precisely because I was aware of its incestuous kinship to my own conscious apathy. None the less, my senses were stirred, though perhaps more by aversion than by desire. Impudently I came still nearer, and looked at her with frank brutality. “I want you, you pretty animal,” was the message of my unveiled eyes; and involuntarily my lips must have moved, for she smiled somewhat contemptuously, turning her head away and letting her skirt drop over the exposed limb. But, a moment later, her dark and sparkling eyes had resumed their tireless roving. She was my match; she was as cool as I. We were both playing with an alien fire, which was nothing more than painted flame, but was pretty to look at. This sport was a pleasant pastime to while away a dull hour.

Suddenly the alertness of her expression vanished; the sparkle in her eyes was dimmed. Though she continued to smile, an irritable fold appeared at the corner of her mouth. I followed the direction of her glance, to see a short, thickset man, whose clothes hung untidily on him, hastening towards her. His face was moist with hurry and excitement, and he was nervously mopping it with his handkerchief. Since his hat was awry, one could see that he was almost bald. (I pictured to myself that beneath this hat his scalp was beaded with sweat, and my gorge rose against the fellow.) In his bejewelled hand was a sheaf of betting-slips. He was bursting with excitement. Paying no heed to his wife, he began to talk loudly to the officer in Magyar. Obviously, he was a devotee of the race-course, probably a horse-dealer in a good way of business, for whom this sport was his one ecstasy, a substitute for the sublime. His wife must have murmured some hint to him (she was manifestly an-

noyed at his coming, and her elemental self-confidence had vanished), for he straightened his hat, laughed jovially, and clapped her on the shoulder with good-humoured affection. She bent her brows angrily, enraged by this conjugal familiarity, which was peculiarly vexatious to her in the presence of the officer and perhaps still more in mine. Her husband apparently said a word of excuse, and then went on speaking in Magyar to the officer, who answered with a complaisant smile. Subsequently, the new-comer took his wife's arm, fondly and perhaps a trifle humbly. It was plain to me that his public display of intimacy was galling to her, and I could not quell a sense of enjoyment at witnessing her humiliation, which aroused in me a feeling of amusement tinged with loathing. But in a moment she recovered her equanimity, and, while gently pressing her husband's arm to her side, she shot a sarcastic glance at me, as if to say: "Look, I am his, not yours." I was both enraged and repelled. I had an impulse to turn on my heel and walk away, to show her that the wife of such a vulgarian had no further interest for me. And yet her lure was too powerful. I stood my ground.

At that moment came the signal for the start, and instantly the chattering crowd was seized as if by a general contagion. Everyone rushed forward to the railings. I restrained myself forcibly from being carried away by this rush, for I wished to stay close by the woman. Perhaps there might be an opportunity for a decisive interchange of looks, a handclasp, or some other advance, and I therefore stubbornly made my way towards her through the scurrying throng. At the very same instant, her fat spouse was hastening in the opposite direction, in search of a good place on the grand stand. Thus moved by conflicting impulses, we came into collision with such violence that his hat was dislodged and fell to the ground. The betting-slips that

TRANSFIGURATION

were stuck in the band were shaken out and scattered over the turf, looking like red, blue, yellow, and white butterflies. He stared at me, and mechanically I was about to apologize. But a malicious imp closed my lips, and made me look at him provocatively without saying a word. For a brief space he endured my gaze, though unsteadily, his face flushing with vexation. But soon he wilted. With an expression of alarm which almost moved me to pity, he turned his face away, appeared of a sudden to remember his betting-slips, and stooped to recover them and to pick up his hat. His wife, furious at what had happened, looked at me scornfully, and I saw with a secret pleasure that she would have liked to slap my face. I continued to stand with a nonchalant air, looking on with a smile and making no motion to help the corpulent fellow who was groping about in search of his betting-slips. In his stooping posture, his collar stood away from his neck like the feathers of a ruffled hen; a roll of fat projected from the red nape; he coughed asthmatically each time he bent forward. The ludicrous spectacle forced another smile from me, and the wife could hardly contain her anger. She was pale now instead of red; at length I had made her show genuine feeling—one of hatred, of untamed wrath. I should have liked to prolong this spiteful scene indefinitely, to go on enjoying thus callously the spectacle of his laborious attempts to retrieve his betting-slips. A whimsical devil seemed to have taken possession of me, was giggling in my throat, and longing to burst out into open laughter. I wanted to prod the grovelling mass of flesh with my stick. Never could I remember having been so overpowered with malice as now when I was triumphing at the humiliation of this audacious woman.

But by this time the poor wretch fancied he had recovered nearly all his slips. Really, he had overlooked one of them, a blue one, which had been carried farther

than the rest, and lay on the ground just in front of me. He was still peering about with his short-sighted eyes, squinting through the eyeglasses that had slipped down his perspiring nose, when the spirit of mischief moved me to prolong his misery, and I slyly covered the blue slip with my foot, so that it would be impossible for him to find it while I maintained the same posture. He went on hunting for it, grunting to himself as he counted and recounted the coloured strips of paper in his hand. Certainly there was still one missing! Amid the growing tumult he was bent on returning to the search, when his wife, who with a savage expression was evading my quizzical glance, could no longer bridle her impatience.

“Lajos!” she called to him suddenly and imperiously.

He started like a horse at the sound of the bugle. Once again he looked searchingly at the ground. I seemed to feel the hidden slip tickling the sole of my foot, and I could hardly refrain from open derision. Then he turned submissively to his wife, who with ostentatious haste led him away to join the tumultuous crowd.

I stayed where I was without the slightest inclination to follow them. As far as I was concerned, the incident was closed. The feeling of erotic tension had given place to an agreeable serenity. My excitement had quite passed away, so that nothing remained beyond a healthy satiety after my sudden outbreak of impishness—nothing, beyond an almost arrogant satisfaction with the success of my coup. In front of me the spectators were closely packed, stirred with increasing excitement. In a dirty, black wave they were pressing on the railings, but I was bored with the races, and had no inclination to look at this one. I might as well go home. As I moved to put this thought into execution, I uncovered the blue slip which by now I had forgotten. Picking it up, I toyed with it in my fingers, uncertain what to do with it. I had a vague thought of restoring it to “Lajos,” for this

TRANSFIGURATION

would give me an excellent chance of making his wife's acquaintance. However, I instantly realized that she was of no further interest to me, that the fire of this adventure had cooled, and that I had relapsed into my customary indifference. A combative exchange of glances with Lajos's wife had been quite enough for me; the thought of sharing a woman with that gross creature was unappetizing; I had enjoyed a transient titillation of the senses, and this had been succeeded by a feeling of agreeable relaxation.

Taking possession of the abandoned chair, I sat down at ease and lighted a cigarette. The little flame of passion had flickered out. Once again I was listless; the renewal of old experiences offered no charm. Idly watching the smoke-wreaths, I thought of the promenade at Meran where, two months earlier, I had sat looking at the waterfall. At Meran, too, there had been a continuous roar that left me unaffected, an unmeaning sound had passed athwart the silence of the blue-tinted landscape. Now the passion of sport was attaining a fresh climax. The foam of fluttering parasols, hats, and handkerchiefs rose above the black wave of humanity. The voices of the throng condensed once more into a single cry. I heard one name, shouted exultantly or despairingly from thousands of throats: "Cressy! Cressy! Cressy!" Once again the noise ceased abruptly, as when a violin-string snaps. The band began to play, and the crowd to break up into groups once more. The numbers of the leading horses were displayed on the board, and half-unconsciously I glanced at them. The winner's number was seven. Mechanically I looked down at the blue slip in my hand. On this, likewise, was a seven.

I could not but laugh. The worthy Lajos had backed the winner! My fit of spleen had actually robbed the fat husband of his money. The sense of impishness

revived; it would be interesting to learn how much my stirring of jealousy had cost him. For the first time I scrutinized the betting-slip attentively. It was for twenty crowns, and for a "win," not simply for a "place." If the odds had been heavy, the slip might now be worth a good deal of money. Following the urge of curiosity, I joined the crowd of those who were hurrying towards the pay desk. I took my stand in the queue and soon reached the window. When I presented my ticket, two prompt and bony hands (I could not see the paying-clerk's face) thrust across nine twenty-crown notes in exchange.

At this moment, when the money was actually offered me, the laughter stuck in my throat. I felt extremely uncomfortable, and involuntarily drew away my hands for a moment, lest I should touch another's man's money. I should really have preferred to leave the blue bank-notes lying on the counter, but hard on my heels were other winners, eager to handle their gains. What could I do but reluctantly pick up the notes? They seemed to burn my fingers as if they had been blue flames and I should have liked to shake off the hand that held them. I suddenly realized the ignominy of my position. The jest had become deadly earnest; had developed into something quite incompatible with my position as a man of honour, a gentleman, an officer in the reserve. I hesitated to give what I had done its true name. The notes in my hand were not simply treasure trove; they had been obtained by fraud, they were stolen money.

There was a clamour of talk all round me, as the people streamed up to the paying-clerk's window and passed on with their winnings. I stood motionless, still holding the unwelcome notes. What had I better do? The first and most obvious thought was to seek out the real winner, to make my excuses, and hand over the

TRANSFIGURATION

money. But how could I do this? Above all, it would be impossible under the eyes of the officer who was the wife's companion. There would be a scandal which would certainly cost me my commission as a lieutenant in the reserve; for even if it might be supposed that I had accidentally picked up the betting-slip, to draw the real owner's winnings had been a dishonourable act. My next idea was to crumple the notes into a ball and throw them away, but in such a crowd someone was sure to see what I did, and the act would arouse suspicion. Yet I could not dream of keeping the money; or of putting it into my note-case until I could give it away to some suitable recipient. From childhood onwards I had had impressed upon me a keen sense of what was fitting in money matters, and the handling of these notes was as unpleasant to me as the wearing of a dirty shirt would have been. Somehow, anyhow, and quickly, I must get rid of the contaminated pieces of paper. Looking around me in hopeless perplexity, in vain search for a hiding-place or for some unwatched possibility for disposal, I noticed that a new line had formed of persons on the way to the window. This time, those in the queue were holding, not betting-slips, but bank-notes. Here was the way out of my difficulty! Chance had brought me this money, and I would commit it to the winds of chance once again; I would thrust it into the greedy maw of that window which was now ceaselessly swallowing up new stakes in the form of silver coin and notes. Yes, yes, there was the path of deliverance.

Impetuously I pressed forward towards the window. Now there were only two backers in front of me. The first was already at the totalizator when it occurred to me that I did not know the names of any of the horses. I listened to the conversation of those standing near me.

"Are you going to back Ravachol?" asked one of another.

"Rather," came the answer.

"Don't you think Teddy has a good chance?" inquired number one.

"Teddy? Not an earthly!" replied number two.
"Teddy's no good. You take my tip."

I grasped at the casual information. Teddy was no good; Teddy could not possibly win. All right, I would back Teddy. I threw down the money, and backed for a win the horse whose name I had just heard for the first time. In exchange for my notes, I received nine red-and-white slips. Even these were disagreeable to handle, but they did not burn my fingers as the greasy notes had done.

I drew a breath of relief, feeling now almost carefree. I had got rid of the money, had shaken off the unpleasant results of my adventure. The matter had become once more what it had been at the outset, a mere joke. I returned to my chair, lighted another cigarette, and blew smoke-rings with renewed content. But this mood did not last. I was restless, got up, walked about, and then sat down again. My agreeable reveries were over. A feeling of nervous irritability had taken possession of me. At first I thought it must be because I dreaded a fresh encounter with Lajos and his wife—but how could they dream that the new slips were really theirs? Nor was it the restlessness of the crowd which disturbed me. Indeed, I found myself watching the passers-by to see if there were any movement towards the barrier. I stood up again and again to look for the flag which is hoisted at the beginning of each race. Yes, I was certainly impatient. I had been seized by the fever of expectancy. I was looking forward to the race which was to close the unseemly incident for ever. A man came by with a bundle of sporting papers. I beckoned to him, bought one, began to search its columns, and, amid a wilderness of strange jargon and

TRANSFIGURATION

‘tipsters’ hints, I at length discovered “Teddy,” learned the names of his jockey and his owner, and was informed that his colours were red and white. Why should these details interest me? Angrily crumpling the newspaper, I threw it away, stood up, and sat down again. Suddenly I had grown hot; I wiped my face; my collar seemed too tight. Was the race never going to begin?

At last the bell sounded. The crowd rushed to the railings, and to my extreme annoyance I found that this bell thrilled me as an alarm thrills one who is awakened by it from sleep. I jumped up so eagerly that I overturned the chair, and I hastened—nay, I ran—forward into the crowd, gripping my betting-slips tightly. I was terrified lest I should be too late, lest I should miss something of the utmost importance. Roughly shouldering my way through, I reached the barrier, and seized a chair on which a lady was about to seat herself. She was an acquaintance, Countess W., and her amazed and angry expression made me aware of my bad manners and my frenzy. But with a mixture of shame and defiance I ignored her, and leapt on to the chair in order to watch the field.

In the far distance, across the turf, I could see the eager horses, with difficulty kept in line by the little jockeys on their backs, who from here looked like harlequin puppets. I tried to make out the colours of my own fancy, but my eyes were untrained to this sport. Everything flickered strangely under my gaze, and I could not distinguish the red and white. Now the bell rang for the second time; and, like seven coloured arrows shot from a single bow, the horses sped along the course. It must be a wonderful sight for those who can contemplate it unmoved, with a purely æsthetic pleasure; for those who can watch the slender race-horses in the gallop which seems almost as free as a bird’s flight. But

I recked naught of this. My one longing was to make out my own horse, my own jockey; and I cursed myself because I had not brought my field-glasses. Though I tried my hardest, I could discern nothing beyond a flying clump of coloured insects. At length the shape of this clump began to alter; at the curve, it assumed the form of a wedge, point foremost, while one or two stragglers were tailing off from the base of the wedge. The race was fiercely contested. Three or four of the galloping beasts were still in a bunch, now one and now another head and neck in front of the rest. Involuntarily I drew myself up to my full height, as if by this imitative and passionate tension I might hope to lend them an added speed.

The excitement of those around me was increasing. The habitués of the race-course must have been able to recognize the colours at the curve, for the names of some of the horses began to detach themselves from the confused shouting. Close by me, one of the onlookers was wringing his hands in his excitement. Now a horse forged a little ahead, and this man stamped, shouting with a raucous and triumphant voice:

“Ravachol! Ravachol!”

The colours worn by the jockey on the leading horse were blue, and I was furious that the animal I had backed was not to the front. The strident shouts of my neighbour, “Ravachol! Ravachol!” became more and more offensive to me. I was enraged, and should have liked to aim my fist at the great black cavity of his yelling mouth. I trembled in my wrath. From moment to moment I felt more capable of some preposterous action. But one of the other horses was pressing the leader hard. Perhaps it was *Teddy*, perhaps, perhaps—and the hope aroused new ardour. Looking at the jockey’s arm as it moved rhythmically, I fancied that the sleeve was red. It might be red; it must be red! Why

TRANSFIGURATION

did not the rascal use his switch more vigorously? His mount had nearly overhauled the leader! Half a head more. Why Ravachol? Ravachol! No, not Ravachol! Not Ravachol! Teddy! Teddy! Go it, Teddy!

Suddenly I pulled myself together. Who was that shouting "Teddy! Teddy!" It was I shouting. In the very midst of my passion. I was startled at myself. I tried to maintain my self-command, and for a moment a sense of shame overpowered my excitement. But I could not tear away my eyes, for the two horses were still neck and neck, and it really must be Teddy that was thus overhauling the accursed Ravachol, the Ravachol I loathed with all my might—for from everywhere there now came a roar of "Teddy! Teddy!" The clamour infected me, after my brief moment's awakening. Teddy must win, must win. Now, in very truth, he was leading by a span; then by two; then by a head and neck. At this moment the bell rang, and there was an explosive shout of jubilation, despair, and anger. For an instant, the longed-for name seemed to fill the heavens. Then the uproar passed, and from somewhere came the strains of music.

I was hot, I was dripping with sweat, my temples were throbbing wildly, when I stepped down from the chair. I had to sit for a while, till the swimming in my head abated. An ecstasy such as I had never known before took possession of me; an idiotic delight at the answer Fate had given to my challenge. Vainly did I try to persuade myself that I had not wanted the horse to win, that my sole desire had been to lose the money. I put no trust in my own persuasion, and I soon became aware of an overmastering impulse. I felt drawn in a particular direction, and I knew whither this impulse led me. I wanted to see the concrete results of my victory; I wanted the money in palpable form; to feel the blue bank-notes, lots of them, crackling between my fingers.

A strange, an alien, an evil lust had taken possession of me, and I no longer had any feeling of shame to prevent my yielding to it. I hurried to the pay-desk. Unceremoniously I thrust myself forward among those who were awaiting their turn at the window, elbowing other impatient winners aside, possessed by the urge to get the money into my hands.

“Bounder!” muttered one of those I had pushed out of my way.

I heard the insult, but ignored it in the fever of my impatience. At length I was at the window, and my fingers closed greedily upon a blue bundle of notes. I counted them over with tremulous exultation. My winnings amounted to six hundred and forty crowns. I snatched up the bundle and left the window.

My first thought was to venture my winnings once more, to multiply them enormously. Where was my sporting paper? Oh, bother, I had thrown it away! I looked round for the chance of buying another, only to notice, to my stupefaction and alarm, that everyone was streaming towards the exit, that the windows of the pay-desks were closed, that the flags were being furled. The day's sport was over. The last race had been run. For a second or two I stood rigid. Then a fierce anger surged up in me, aroused by a keen sense of injustice. It seemed so unfair that when all my nerves were aquiver, and when the blood was rushing through my veins with a vigour I had not known for years, the game should be played out. But I could not cheat myself into the belief that I had made a mistake, for the crowd grew ever thinner, and broad stretches of trampled turf had become visible amid the few remaining loiterers. Gradually realizing the absurdity of my tense expectation, I, too, moved towards the exit. An obsequious attendant sprang forward. I gave him the number of my cab. He bawled it through his hands, and in an instant my driver

TRANSFIGURATION

whipped forward from the waiting throng. I told him to drive slowly down the main avenue. My excitement was on the wane, was being replaced by an agreeable lassitude. I wanted to rehearse the whole scene in my thoughts.

At this moment another cab drove past. I glanced at it without thinking, but promptly turned my eyes away, for in it were the woman and her corpulent husband. They did not notice me. But at sight of them I was overcome by a disagreeable choking sensation, as if I had been found out. Their nearness made me uneasy.

The cab moved along quietly on its rubber-tyred wheels, in line with the others. The brightly coloured dresses of the women made these cabs look like flower-laden boats sailing down a canal with green banks bordered on either side by chestnut trees. The air was balmy, the first breath of the evening coolness was wafted across the dust. But the agreeable pensiveness came no more; the sight of the man I had swindled disturbed me, it blew upon my ardours like a chill draught. With sobered senses I reviewed the episode, and found it impossible to understand my own actions. How could I, an officer and a gentleman, have done such a thing? Without the pressure of need, I had appropriated another's money, and had done so with a zest which put my behaviour beyond the possibility of excuse. I, who an hour before had never transgressed the bounds of good form, had now actually become a thief. As if desiring to frighten myself, I passed judgment on myself by muttering, in time with the rhythm of the horses' hoofs:

“Thief! Thief! Thief! Thief!”

How shall I describe the strange thing that now befell? It seems so inexplicable, so amazing, and yet I am convinced that my memory of it is perfectly ac-

curate. Every instant of my feeling, every pulse of my thought, during that brief period, comes back to me with supernatural clearness. Hardly any other happening throughout my thirty-five years of life is so vivid. Yet I scarcely dare to record in black and white the absurd succession, the preposterous seesaw, of my sensations. I do not know if any imaginative writer or any psychologist could depict them in logical order. All I can do is to sketch the sequence faithfully.

I was muttering to myself "thief, thief, thief." Then came a strange pause, a vacant interval, in which nothing happened; in which—how hard it is to explain—I merely listened, listened inwardly. I had formulated the charge against myself, and now it was time for the accused to answer the charge. I listened, therefore, but nothing happened. I had expected that this name of "thief" would frighten me like the crack of a whip, would overwhelm me with shame; but there was no such response. I waited patiently for a few minutes, leaning over myself, so to speak, that I might watch the better (for I was convinced that there must be something astir beneath this obdurate silence). Feverishly expectant, I waited for the echo, for the cry of disgust, indignation, despair, that must follow so grave an accusation. Nothing! There was no answer! Once more I repeated to myself "thief, thief"; quite loud this time, in the hope of awakening my conscience, which seemed to be rather hard of hearing. Still there was no answer. Suddenly, in a lightning flash of awareness, I realized that I was only trying to feel ashamed, but was not in the least ashamed; that somewhere in the secret recesses of my being I was proud, was elated, because of my crazy deed.

How could this be? I was now positively afraid of myself, and tried to ward off the unexpected realization; but the feeling I have attempted to describe was ir-

TRANSFIGURATION

resistible. There was no shame, no indignation, no self-contempt. This current of strong feeling was joy, intoxicating delight, which flamed up in me because I realized that during those few minutes I had for the first time been genuinely alive once more after the lapse of many years. I rejoiced to know that my feelings had merely been paralysed, and were not utterly dead; that somewhere beneath the smooth surface of my indifference volcanic passion must still be raging; and that this afternoon, touched by the magic wand of chance, the volcano had erupted. In me, in me too, in this fragment of the living universe that passed by my name, there still glowed the mysterious and essential fire of our mortal life, which breaks forth from time to time in the vigorous pulses of desire. I too lived, was alive, was a human being with evil and ardent lusts. A door had been thrust open by the storm of this passion; an abyss had been riven in me, and with a voluptuous giddiness I gazed into the unknown profound with a sense of terror and delight. By degrees, while the cab gently conveyed my entranced body on its way through the respectable concourse, I climbed down step by step into the depths of the human within me, incredibly alone in this silent descent, lighted on my way by the flaring torch of my newly enkindled consciousness. What time a thousand others were laughing and chattering around me, I was seeking within myself the human being I had so long lost sight of, was traversing years in the magical course of reflection. Long buried memories surged up from the cobwebbed recesses of my mind. I recalled that, in my school days, I had stolen another boy's pocket-knife, and remembered how, while I watched him hunting everywhere in vain and asking all his comrades if they had seen his knife, I had been animated with the same impish joy I had felt this afternoon. Now, at length, I could understand the strange intensity of some of my love

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

experiences; could understand that my passion had only been distorted but had never been completely suppressed by the social illusion, by the dominant ideal of gentility. Deeply hidden within me, as within others, there had continued to flow all the time the hot current of life. Yes, I had lived, and yet had not dared to live; I had kept myself in bondage, and had hidden myself from myself. But now the repressed energy had broken loose; life, teeming with ineffable power, had carried me away. I knew that I was still alive. With the blissful confusion of the woman who first feels her child quicken within her, I perceived the reality, the irrefragable truth, of life germinating within me. I felt (I am almost ashamed to use the expression) that I, the man who had been fading and dying, was blossoming anew; I felt the red blood coursing through my veins, and that in these fresh blossoms there would grow unknown fruits both sweet and bitter. The miracle of Tannhäuser's blossoming staff had come to pass in me—on a race-course amid the tumult of a thousand idlers. I had begun to feel once again. The dry staff was sprouting, was thrusting forth buds.

From a passing carriage a man hailed me, shouting my name—obviously I had failed to see his first and quieter salutation. I was furious at being roused out of the agreeable state of self-absorption, the profoundest reverie I had ever experienced. But a glance at my acquaintance recalled me to my ordinary self; it was my friend Alfons, an intimate of my school days, now public prosecutor. The thought flashed through my mind: "This man who greets you so cordially has now power over you; you would be at his mercy if he knew what you had done. Did he know, it would be his duty to hale you out of this cab, to tear you away from your comfortable existence, to have you kept behind bars for several years, in company with the scum of life, with those other

TRANSFIGURATION

thieves who have only been brought to the sordid pass of prison by the lash of necessity."

But this was no more than a momentary uneasiness. The thought was promptly transformed into an ardent feeling, a fantastic and impudent pride, which made me sample almost scornfully the people within my range of vision: "If you only knew, the friendly smile with which you greet me as one of yourselves would be frozen on your lips, and you would contemptuously give me the cut direct. But I have been beforehand with you. This afternoon I broke away from your cold and petrified world in which I was one of the wheels running noiselessly in the great machine, one of the idle wheels. I have plunged into an unknown abyss; and in this one hour of the plunge I have lived more fully than in all the sheltered years in your circle. I do not belong to you any more. I am no longer one of your set; I may be on the heights or in the depths, but never shall I return to the dead levels of your philistine comfort. For the first time I have felt all the thrill that man can feel in good and in evil; but you will never know where I have been, will never understand me. Never will you be able to pluck the heart out of my mystery!"

How can I describe all that I felt while I was thus driving, to outward appearance a man of fashion, quietly exchanging greetings with those of his own order! For while my larval form, the semblance of the man that had been, continued thus to recognize sometime acquaintances—within me there was surging so intoxicating a music that I had to keep a tight rein on myself lest I should shout in my exultation. There was such an uprush of emotion that it aroused a sense of bodily distress. Like one who is gasping for want of air, I pressed my hand on my heart and sensed its painful throbbing. But pain and pleasure, alarm, disgust, or concern, were not isolated and detached feelings. They

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

were integrally fused, so that the sum of my sensations was that I lived and breathed and felt. It was the simplest and most primitive of feelings, one that I had not experienced for ages, and it went to my head like wine. Not for a single instant during my thirty-five years had I had such an ecstatic sense of being alive.

My driver pulled up the horses, and the cab stopped with a jerk. Turning on the box, the man asked me whether I wanted to drive home. Emerging from my reverie, I glanced up and down the avenue, astonished to note how long I had been dreaming, how the intoxication of my senses had swallowed up the hours. Night had fallen; the tree-tops were whispering in the breeze; the cool air was fragrant with the scent of the chestnut blossoms. The silvery moon could be glimpsed through the foliage. It was impossible to return home, impossible to go back into my customary world. I paid the driver. As I was counting out his fare, the touch of the banknotes sent a kind of electric shock running up my arm; there were still vestiges of the larval personality, which could feel ashamed. My dying gentlemanly conscience still stirred within me, but none the less the touch of the stolen money was agreeable, and I was spendthrift in my delight. The cabman was so effusive in his thanks, that I could not but smile as I thought: "If you only knew!" He whipped up his horse and drove off. I looked after the cab as from shipboard a voyager will look back upon the receding shores of a land where he has spent happy days.

For a little while I stood musing. Then I strolled across towards the Sacher Garden, where it was my wont to dine after driving in the Prater. No doubt this was why the cabman had pulled up where he did. But when my hand was on the bell of the garden gate of this fashionable open-air restaurant, I had a counter-impulse. I did not want to go back into the familiar world. The idle

chatter of my social equals would dispel this wonderful, this mysterious fermentation—would tear me away from the sparkling magic of my afternoon adventure.

From somewhere in the distance came snatches of music, and the crazy sounds drew me, as everything with a lure in it drew me that day. My mood made it delightful to follow chance currents. There was an extraordinary fascination in thus drifting amid the crowd. I fermented with the fermenting mass; all my senses were stirred by the acrid fumes of mingled dust, tobacco, human breath, and human sweat. Everything which till recently, till yesterday, had seemed to me vulgar and plebeian, and consequently repulsive, everything which I had been sedulously trained to avoid, had now become the goal of instinctive desire, as if for the first time I realized my own kinship with the animal, the impulsive, and the ordinary. Here, in the purlieus of the city, among common soldiers, servant girls, and vagabonds, I found myself inexplicably at ease. I breathed this new air exultantly; rubbing shoulders with the crowd was pleasant; and with voluptuous curiosity I waited to learn whither my drifting would lead me. As I drew nearer to the Wurstel Prater, the blare of the brass band grew louder; it coalesced with the monotonous sound of orchestrions playing harsh polkas and riotous waltzes, with strange noises from the booths, outbursts of coarse laughter and drink-sodden yells. Through the trees I caught sight of the roundabouts whirling amid their glare of lights. I drank in the whole tumult. The cascade of noises, the infernal medley, was grateful to me. I watched the girls on the switchback, their skirts blown out by the wind; heard them screaming in a way characteristic of their sex at each swoop of the car. There were butchers' lads roaring with laughter at the Try-Your-Strength machine; touts standing at the doors of the booths, making monkey-like gestures,

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

and doing their best to shout down the noise of the orchestrions. All this mixed confusedly with the manifold movements and clamours of the crowd, drunken with the cheap intoxication of the brass band, the flashing lights, and its own warm tumultuousness. Now that I had been awakened, I was able to enter into the life of these others, to share in the ardours of the great city, in its riot of Sunday amusement, its animal-like and nevertheless healthy and impulsive enjoyments. Through my contact with this tumultuous life, with these hot and passionate bodies, some of their fervour was transmitted to myself. My nerves were toned up by the acrid aroma ; my senses wantoned amid the tumult ; I had that intangible but sensuous ecstasy which is inseparable from every strong pleasure. Never before, perhaps, had I thus been in touch with the crowd, had I thus grasped humanity-at-large as a massed power from which pleasure could flow into my own separate personality. The barriers had been broken down, so that my own individual circulation was now connected up with the blood current of this wider world. I was seized with a new longing to overthrow the last obstacles between myself and this wider life ; I was filled with an ardent desire for conjugation with this warm and strange and teeming humanity. With a man's lust I lusted after the flesh of this titanic body ; and with a woman's lust I was ready to accept all its caresses and to respond to its every lure. Yes, at length I realized it, I loved and I longed to be loved as when I had been a boy first growing into manhood. I craved for life ; for union with the laughing and breathing passion of these others, to be bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. Enough to be small and nameless in the medley, an infusorian in the slime of the world, one tiny fragment of vigorous life among the myriads. Enough, so long as I was in and of that life, moving with others in the circle, no longer shot

TRANSFIGURATION

away like an arrow animated with an isolated energy and moving towards some heaven of separateness.

I am well aware that I was drunk. All the influences of the environment were at work in my blood: the clang-ing of the bells of the roundabouts; the lascivious laughter of the women when gripped by their male companions; the chaos of music; the rustling of the garments. My finger-tips and temples were throbbing. I had a fierce urge to speak, to break the silence of many hours. Never had I such a longing for human intercourse, as here among this surging crowd, of whom nevertheless I was not yet one. I was like a man dying of thirst upon the ocean. The torment of my own separateness increased moment by moment, while I watched strangers, who were strangers also to one another, coalescing into groups and breaking up again like globules of quicksilver. I was filled with envy when I saw young fellows making girls' acquaintance in one moment, and walking arm-in-arm with them the next. A word while on the roundabout, a glance in passing, sufficed; the strangers entered into conversation, and perhaps separated after a minute or two; but meanwhile there had been a union, an intercourse of thoughts and feelings, such as my soul craved.

Here was I, a man at home in the best society, with a certain reputation as a conversationalist, one who knew all the rules of the social game—yet I was timid and abashed, was afraid to accost a buxom servant wench lest she should laugh at me. I lowered my eyes when anyone glanced at me, eager though I was to begin a talk. My desires were far from clear to me, but of one thing I was convinced, that I could no longer endure to be alone, consumed by my own fever. Still, no one greeted me, all passed by unheeding. Once a lad came near me, a boy about twelve years old in ragged clothes; his eyes shone with the reflex of the lamps as he stared

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

longingly at the whirling wooden horses. There he stood open-mouthed. Having no money to pay for a ride, he was perforce content with the next best thing, with enjoying the shrieks and laughter of the fortunate riders. I constrained myself to walk up to him and ask (why did my voice tremble and my tone ring false?):

“Wouldn’t you like to have a ride?”

He stared up at me, took fright (why? why?), flushed scarlet, and fled without a word. Not even a bare-footed urchin would accept a little pleasure from me. There must be something extraordinary repellent about me—such was my thought. What else could account for my inability to become one with the crowd; for the way in which, amid the turbulent waters, I was as detached as a droplet of oil?

But I would not give in; I could no longer bear to be alone. My feet were burning in my dusty patent-leather shoes; my throat was parched. Looking to right and left through gaps in the crowds, I could see islets of green on which there were tables decked with red cloths. Here, on wooden benches and chairs, tradespeople were seated, drinking beer and smoking cigars. This seemed attractive. Strangers hobnobbed here, and there was comparative quiet amid the turmoil. I went to one of these oases, and scrutinized the groups till I spied a table at which there were five persons—a fat, stocky workman, his wife, two merry girls, and a little boy. Their heads wagged in time with the music, they were chaffing one another and laughing, and their cheerful faces were good to see. I raised my hat, touched a chair, and asked I if might sit down. Instantly their laughter was frozen, and there was a moment’s pause in which each of them seemed to be waiting for one of the others to answer. Then the mother, though disconcerted, murmured:

“If you please.”

TRANSFIGURATION

I sat down, with the feeling that my arrival had put an end to their inconstraint. A deadly silence now brooded over the table. I did not dare to raise my eyes from the red check tablecloth, on which salt and pepper had been freely spilled; but I realized that they must all be eyeing me stealthily, and it occurred to me (too late!) that my appearance was quite out of keeping with a beer garden of this character. My smartly-cut suit, my tall hat, the pearl pin in my dove-grey necktie, the general odour of luxury I exhaled, had sufficed to dig between me and my table-companions a chasm across which they glared at me with confusion and hostility. The silence of the five made it ever more impossible for me to raise my eyes. Shame forbade my leaving the place I had taken, so I sat there despairingly counting and recounting the checks on the tablecloth. Great was my relief when the waiter brought me my beer in a thick and heavy glass. At length I could move, and as I drank I could look at my companions furtively. Yes, I was the centre of all their eyes; and their expression, though not one of positive hatred, betrayed immeasurable estrangement. They knew me for an interloper into their dull world. With the instinct of their class they felt that I was in search of something which did not belong to my own surroundings. Not from love, not from longing, not from simple pleasure in waltzes or in beer, not in search of the placid enjoyments of the day of rest, could I have come to this resort. They felt that I must have been impelled by some desire beyond the range of their understanding, and they mistrusted me, as the youngster had mistrusted my offer to pay for his ride on the roundabout, as the thousand nameless frequenters of this place of merry-making mistrusted my unfamiliar appearance, manners, and mode of speech. Yet I felt sure that could I only happen upon a cordial, straightforward, and genuinely human way of opening

up a conversation, the father or the mother would answer me, the daughters would giggle approvingly, and I should be able to take the boy with me to one of the shooting galleries, or to enjoy whatever sport might best please him. In five or ten minutes I should be delivered from myself, should be breathing the frank atmosphere of familiar converse, should be accepted as a desirable acquaintance—but the words I wanted were undiscoverable; I was stifled by false shame; and I sat among these simple folk wearing a hang-dog expression as if I were a criminal, tormented by the sense that my unwelcome presence was spoiling the last hour of their Sunday. In this formidable silence I atoned for all the years of careless arrogance in which without a glance I had passed thousands of such tables, millions upon millions of my brother human beings, concerned only with success in my own smart circle. I perceived that the way leading to unrestrained converse with them in this hour of my need had been walled up from my side.

Thus I, who had hitherto been a free man, sat humbly with bowed head, counting and recounting the checks on the cloth, until the waiter came that way again. I settled up, left most of my beer, and uttered a civil farewell. The response was friendly, but not unmixed with astonishment. I knew, without looking, that, directly my back was turned, directly the foreign body had been removed, the round of cheerful talk would be resumed.

Again I threw myself into the maelstrom of the crowd—more eagerly this time and more despairingly. The press had become less dense under the black canopy of the trees, nor was there so great a throng where the roundabout cast its glare; but in the darker parts of the square, along the edges, there seemed to be as many people as ever. The deep roar of the pleasure-seekers had broken up into a number of distinct smaller sounds,

TRANSFIGURATION

though these were fused into one from time to time when the music raged furiously as if in an attempt to summon back the seceders. New elements were conspicuous in the crowd. The children, with their air-balloons, paper windmills, and streamers, had been taken home, and the family parties had disappeared. Some of those who remained were uproariously drunk; vagabonds on the prowl were conspicuous in the side alleys; during the hour in which I had been glued to the table in the beer-garden, this remarkable world had changed considerably for the worse. But the stimulating aroma of rascality and danger was more congenial to me than the atmosphere of working-class respectability had been. The instinct that had awakened in me was in tune with the like tensions of those I was now contemplating. I seemed to see myself reflected in the slouching demeanour of these questionable shapes, these outcasts of society. Like myself, they were in search of some vivid adventure, some swift excitement. I positively envied the ragged prowlers, envied them for their lack of restraint. For there I stood leaning against one of the pillars of the roundabout, longing to break the spell of silence, to free myself from the torment of loneliness, and yet incapable of movement or speech. I stood and stared across the square, across the brilliantly lighted open space, into the darkness on the other side, expectantly scrutinizing everyone who drew near. But none would meet my gaze. All looked at me with chill indifference. No one wanted me, no one would set me free.

How can I attempt to describe or explain what must sound like lunacy? Here was I, a man of education, rich and independent, at home in the best society of the capital—and that night I stood for a whole hour beside one of the pillars of a giddy-go-round, listening to twenty, forty, a hundred repetitions of the same waltz,

the same polka, and watching the revolutions of the same idiotic horses of carved and painted wood—while an obdurate defiance, a determination to await the magic turn of fate, kept me rooted to the spot. I know that my conduct was absurd, but my torment during that hour was an expiation. And what I was expiating was not my theft, but the dull vacancy of my life prior to that afternoon. I had sworn to myself that I would not leave the spot until a sign had been vouchsafed that fate had set me free.

As the hour passed, the merry-making gradually came to an end. In one booth after another the lamps were extinguished, so that the darkness seemed to advance like a flood. The island of light where I was standing grew ever more isolated. In alarm I glanced at my watch. Another quarter of an hour and the garish wooden horses would cease to turn, the red and green lamps dangling from their foreheads would be switched off, and the blaring orchestrion would be silenced. Then I should be in the dark, alone in the murmuring night, outcast and forlorn. More and more uneasily I looked across the darkling square, traversed now only at intervals by a couple hastening homewards or by one or two reeling roisterers. But opposite me in the deep shadow there lurked a restless and stimulating life. When a man passed by, I could hear, emerging from this darkness, a whispered invitation. If, in answer, the passer-by turned his head, a woman's voice would speak more distinctly, and sometimes a woman's laugh was borne to me on the breeze. Little by little these dwellers in the darkness, growing bolder, began to invade the lighted square, but vanished instantly if the spiked helmet of a policeman loomed anywhere within sight. Directly the constable had passed on his round, the prowling shadows returned, and now, when they ventured farther into the light, I could make out plainly

TRANSFIGURATION

enough the ultimate scum that remained from the current of busy human life. They were prostitutes of the lowest class, those who have no homes to which they can take their customers, those who sell themselves for a trifle in any dark corner, harried by the police, harried by hunger, and harried by their own bullies, continually hunted and continually on the prowl for prey. Like hungry hounds they nosed their way across the lighted square towards anything masculine, towards any late straggler who might be tempted to satiate his lust for a crown or two. The money would buy a hot drink and a morsel of food at a coffee-stall, and would help to keep the life in them until its flicker should be extinguished in hospital or jail.

Here was the very scum, the last spume, of the sensual flood of this Sunday crowd. With immeasurable horror I watched these wolfish forms slinking out of the gloom. But even in my horror there was an elemental pleasure, for in this tarnished mirror I could see vestiges of my own forgotten past. Here was a morass through which I had myself made my way in earlier years, and its phosphorescent marsh-lights were glowing anew in my senses. I recalled the days of adolescence, when my eye would rest on such figures as these with a mixture of alarm and eagerness; and I recalled the hour when I had first followed such a woman up a damp and creaky stair. Suddenly, as if illumined by a lightning-flash, I saw in sharp relief every detail of that forgotten hour; the insipid oleograph over the woman's bed, the mascot she wore round her neck; and I remembered the ardour of yore, tinged with loathing and also with the pride of budding manhood. With a clarity of vision that was new to me I realized why sympathy with these outcasts was stirring within me. The instinct that had roused me to my crime of the afternoon made me feel my kinship with these hungry marauders. The pocket-

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

book with the stolen money in it seemed to burn my breast where I carried it. I felt that across there in the darkness were human creatures, breathing and speaking, who wanted something of others, perhaps of me—of me who only waited to give himself, who was filled with a yearning for his fellows. At length I understood what drives men to such women. Seldom, indeed, are they driven merely by the urge of the senses. The main motive is dread of solitude, of the terrible feeling of aloofness which severs us one from another, and which I for the first time had fully realized that day. I recalled when I had last experienced it, though more dully. It had been in England, in Manchester, one of those towns hard as iron, roaring under grey skies with the noise of an underground railway, but there the visitor is apt to experience the chill of utter loneliness. I had passed three weeks there, staying with relatives, spending my evenings in bar-rooms, music-halls, and like places, always in search of the warmth of human companionship. One evening, I encountered such a woman, whose gutter English I could scarcely understand. Almost unawares, I found myself with her. I drank laughter from a strange mouth. A body was close to me, warm and soft. The cold, black town had vanished; the gloomy, thunderous abode of solitude was no longer there. In their stead was a fellow-creature, an unknown woman, who waited for all comers, and could bring deliverance. I breathed freely once more, I discerned the brightness of life even in this iron cage. How precious to the lonely, to those who are imprisoned within themselves, is this knowledge that after all they can find relief, that there is something to which they can cling, though it be something worn and besmirched. This is what I had forgotten during that hour of unspeakable loneliness. I had forgotten that out there in the darkness there were still those ready to give the uttermost in

TRANSFIGURATION

exchange for a trifling coin—which is assuredly too small a return for that which they bestow with their eternal readiness to give the great gift of human companionship.

The orchestrion of the roundabout by which I was standing began once more. This was the last turn; the last time the circling light would flash out into the dark before the Sunday passed into the drab weekdays. But there were very few riders; the tired woman at the receipt of custom was counting up the day's takings, and the odd man was standing by with a hook ready to pull down the noisy shutters directly the round was finished. I stood leaning against the post, looking across the empty square—empty except for the prowling figures I have described. Like me, they were expectant; and yet between them and me was a barrier of estrangement I could not cross. Now one of them must have noticed me, for she sidled past me, and from beneath my lowered eyelids I took in every detail of her appearance. She was a small woman, crippled by rickets, hatless, wearing a tawdry outfit, and down-at-heel dancing shoes, the whole probably bought at an old-clothes shop, and since then much worsened by the rough usage incidental to her trade. She stopped close at hand, and looked at me with a wheedling expression, and a smile of invitation that showed her bad teeth. I could hardly breathe. I feigned not to see her, and yet could not tear away my eyes. As if hypnotized, I realized that a human being was coveting me, was wooing me, that at length with a word or a gesture I could put an end to my hateful loneliness, to my tormenting sense of being an outcast. But I could not say the word or make the sign; I was as wooden as the post beside which I was standing. Nevertheless, while the tune of the roundabout dragged wearily to its close, even my impotence was suffused with pleasure because of the near presence of this woman who wooed me, I

closed my eyes for a moment to enjoy the magnetic lure of invitation from a fellow-creature.

The merry-go-round stopped turning, and therewith the waltz wheezed out into silence. I opened my eyes to perceive that the woman had begun to move away. Obviously she was tired of soliciting a wooden image. I was alarmed, and turned cold of a sudden. Why had I let her go, the one human being that had made advances to me on this amazing night? Behind me the lights were switched off, and the steel rollers were clattering down into their sockets. The revels were over.

Suddenly—how shall I describe the ferment within me? Suddenly I was overwhelmed with the longing that this bedraggled and rickety little prostitute would turn her head that I might speak to her. Not that I was too proud to follow her (my pride had been stamped into the dust, and had been replaced by feelings quite new to me); I was too irresolute. I stood there yearning that this poor little wretch would turn once more and favour me with her look of invitation.

And, she turned. Almost mechanically, she glanced over her shoulder. The release of tension must have been plainly manifest in my eyes, for she stopped to watch me. Then, turning half round, she beckoned with a movement of the head, beckoned me towards the darker side of the square. At length the hideous spell that had held me rigid was lifted. I was again able to move, and I nodded assent.

The invisible treaty had been signed. In the faint light she walked across the square, looking back from time to time to see if I was following her. And I followed. I was drawn along in her wake. She slackened her pace in an alley between the booths, and there I overtook her.

For a few seconds she looked me up and down with suspicion. Something about me made her doubtful—my

TRANSFIGURATION

timidity, and the contrast between my appearance and the place in which she found me. But after this brief hesitation, she pointed along the alley, which towards the end was black as pitch, saying:

“Let’s go down there. It’s quite dark behind the circus.”

I could not answer. The horrible commonness of this encounter struck me dumb. I should have liked to buy myself off with a crown or two and a word of excuse, but my will had no power over my actions. I felt as one feels on a toboggan, sweeping round a curve leading to a precipitous descent, when a sense of fear is pleasantly fused with the exhilaration of speed, so that, instead of trying to hold back, one surrenders to the delight of the plunge. Thus I could not hold back, and perhaps no longer even wished to do so. When she pressed up against me, I took her involuntarily by the arm. It was very thin—not a woman’s arm, but that of an undersized child—and when I felt it through her flimsy sleeve, I was overwhelmed with pity for this poor little fragment of downtrodden humanity which the night had tossed into my path.

We crossed the dimly lighted roadway and entered a little wood where the tree-tops brooded over an evil-smelling darkness. I noticed that she half turned to look back as we entered, and that she did the same thing a few paces farther on. Even though I seemed paralysed as I slipped into this sordid adventure, my senses were keenly awake. With a lucidity which nothing could escape, I perceived that a shadow was following us along the edge of the path, and I could hear a stealthy footstep. The situation was clear to me in a flash. I was to be lured into an out-of-the-way spot, where the girl and her bully would have me at their mercy. With the marvellous insight which comes in moments betwixt life and death, I weighed up the chances. There was

still time to get away. We were close to the main road, for I could hear the sound of a tramcar. A cry or a whistle would bring help. Thus I turned over in my mind all the possibilities of flight or rescue.

Strangely enough, however, the danger of my position inflamed my ardour instead of cooling it. To-day I find it difficult to account for the absurdity of my behaviour. Even as I moved onward, I knew that I was needlessly putting my head into a noose; but the anticipation thrilled me. Something repulsive awaited me, perhaps deadly peril. Loathsome was the thought of the base issues in which I was becoming involved. But in my then mood of intoxication, even the menace of death exercised a sinister lure. What drove me forwards? Was I ashamed to show the white feather, or was I simply weak? I think, rather, that the ruling passion was a desire to taste the very dregs of life, a longing to stake my whole existence upon one cast. That was why, though fully aware of the risks I was running, I went on into the wood arm-in-arm with the wench who had no physical attractions, and who regarded me only as a pigeon for her and her companion to pluck. I must play out the play which had begun with my crime on the race-course, must play it to the end, even if the fall of the curtain should be death.

After a few more paces, she stopped and looked back yet again. Then she glanced at me expectantly, and said:

“Well, how much are you going to give me?”

Ah, yes, I had forgotten that aspect of the matter. But her question did not sober me. Far from it. I was so glad to be able to give riotously. Searching my pockets, I poured into her extended hand all the silver I had with me and two or three crumpled notes. Now there happened something so remarkable that it warms my heart when I think of it. Perhaps the girl was amazed at

TRANSFIGURATION

my largesse; perhaps, in my spendthrift gesture, there was something quite new to her. Anyhow, she stepped back a pace, and through the thick, evil-smelling obscurity I could feel that her eyes were fixed on mine with astonished inquiry. At length I could enjoy what I had been craving for all the evening. Someone was concerned with me as an individual; for the first time I had become really alive to someone in this new world. The fact that it was an outcast among outcasts, a derelict who hawked her poor worn body in the darkness and never even saw the buyer's face—that this was the creature who now looked questioningly at me and was trying to understand what sort of human being I might be—served only to intensify my strange exaltation. She drew closer to me, no longer in professional fulfilment of the task for which she had been paid, but animated, I believe, by an unconscious sense of gratitude, by a feminine desire for a caressive contact. Once more I took her by the emaciated arm; I felt the touch of her frail twisted body; and I pictured to myself what her life had been and was. I thought of the foul lodging in some slum, where from early morning till noon she had to snatch what sleep she could amid a noisy rabble of children. I pictured the souteneur who would knock her about; the drunken wretches who would be her usual clients; her life in the lock hospital; the workhouse infirmary in which she would end her days. Touched with infinite compassion, I stooped, and, to her amazement, kissed her.

At this moment there was rustling behind me, and a fallen branch snapped. There was a guffaw, then a man spoke.

“Caught you in the act! Thought I should!”

Before I saw them, I knew who they were. I had not forgotten that I was being spied upon, and all the time I had been expecting this intervention. A figure became

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

visible to me, followed by a second; two savage-looking louts. There were more chuckles, and then:

“At your dirty tricks here in public. A gentleman, too, if you please! But we’ll make him squeal.”

I stood unmoved. My temples throbbed, but I was quite free from anxiety, and merely waited to see what would happen. Now I was indeed in the depths. At last would come the climax towards which I had been drifting.

The girl had started away from me, but not to join the men. She stood between us, and apparently the part assigned to her was not altogether congenial. The louts were obviously discomfited by my indifference. They looked at one another in perplexity, wondering why I did not betray any anxiety, or beg to be let off. At last one of them cried in a menacing tone:

“Aha! he’s got nothing to say.”

The other stepped up to me, and spoke imperatively:

“You must come with us to the station.”

Still I made no answer. Then the man near me touched me on the shoulder, and gave me a little push.

“Step it,” he said.

I did as I was bid, making no attempt to resist. Of course I was well aware that these fellows must be much more afraid of the police than I was, and that I could ransom myself for a few crowns; but I wanted to savour all the horrible humours of the situation. Slowly and mechanically I moved in the direction they indicated.

But this patent acceptance of the position, this willingness to return to the light, confounded my tormentors.

“Hist! Hist!”—they exchanged signals, and then began to speak with forced loudness.

“Better let the beggar go,” said one of the two, a pockmarked shrimp of a man.

The other assumed a tone of stricter morality:

“No, no, that won’t do. If he were a poor devil of our

TRANSFIGURATION

sort, without a morsel to line his belly with, they'd lock him up fast enough. We can't let our fine gentleman go scot free."

Through the words and the tone breathed an awkward invitation that I should begin bargaining. The criminal in me understood the criminal in them. I knew that they wanted to cow me, and that they themselves were cowed by my ready compliance. There was a dumb contest between myself and the two. How glorious it was! In imminent danger, in this filthy grove, dogged by a couple of bullies and a whore, I felt for the second time within twelve hours the magical charm of hazard—but this time the stake was higher, the stake was life itself. I surrendered wholly to the strange sport, awaiting the cast of the dice.

"Ah, there's a copper," said one of the men. "Our fine gentleman will have a jolly time of it. They won't give him less than a week in quod."

This was intended to alarm me, but I could hear that the speaker was far from sure of himself. I walked on confidently towards the lamp, where in actual fact I could see the gleaming spike of a policeman's helmet. Twenty paces, and we should reach him. The men behind me had nothing more to say. They were already lagging, and in a moment, I was sure, they would vanish into the darkness. They would slip back into their own world, embittered by their failure, and would perhaps wreak their anger upon the unhappy drab. The game was finished, and once more that day I was a winner. Just before reaching the bright circle of light cast on the ground by the street lamp, I turned, and for the first time looked into the faces of the two bullies. Their eyes betrayed both vexation and shame. They stood there cowed, ready for instant flight. Their power was at an end; the tables were turned, and they had good cause to be afraid of me.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

At this instant, however, I was overcome by a feeling of immense sympathy, of brotherly sympathy for these two fellows. After all, what had they wanted of me, the two hungry loafers? What had they wanted of me, the overfed parasite? Two or three paltry crowns! They might have throttled me there in the gloomy wood, might have robbed me and murdered me. Yet they had merely tried, in clumsy fashion, to frighten me into handing over some of my loose silver. How could I dare, I who had been a thief from sheer caprice, who had become a criminal because I wanted a thrill, how could I dare to torment the poor devils? In my turn, I was ashamed because I had played with their fears. Now, at the last moment, when I had escaped from their toils, I would soothe the disappointment which was so obvious in their hollow eyes.

With an abrupt change of front, I went up to one of them, and simulated anxiety as I said :

“Why do you want to hand me over to the police? What do you expect to get out of it? Perhaps I shall be put in prison for a few days, perhaps not. Will you be any the better off? Why should you wish to do me harm?”

They stared at me in hopeless perplexity. Anything else they might have been prepared for, a denunciation, a threat, before which they would have cringed like dogs; but they did not know what to make of my yielding at the eleventh hour. At length one of them answered, not menacingly, but as if in self-exculpation :

“Justice must take its course. We are only doing our duty.”

Plainly this was a stock phrase, conned for such occasions. But this time there was no spirit in it. Neither of them ventured to look at me. They waited. I knew what they were waiting for. They wanted me to beg for mercy, and then to offer them money.

TRANSFIGURATION

I can recall the whole scene perfectly, and can remember every detail of my own feelings. I know, therefore, that malice prompted me to keep them on tenterhooks, in order that I might enjoy their discomfiture the more. But I constrained my will, for I knew that it behoved me to set their anxieties at rest. I began, therefore, to play a little comedy of terror, imploring them not to denounce me. I saw how embarrassed were these inexperienced blackmailers, and I felt that I must break down the barrier of silence between us.

At length I came to the words in expectation of which their mouths had been watering.

“I will give you . . . I will give you a hundred crowns.”

All three of them were startled, and looked at one another in amazement. They had never expected such a sum at this stage, when they had given the game up for lost. But after a while the pock-marked man with the shifty eyes braced his courage a little. He made two unsuccessful attempts to break the spell. At last, and shamefully, he managed to get out the words:

“Make it two hundred, Guv’nor.”

“Drop it, can’t you!” the girl suddenly broke in. “You can be jolly glad if he gives you anything at all. He hardly touched me. It’s really a bit too thick.”

She was furious, and my heart sang within me. Someone sympathized with me, interceded for me. Kindness rose out of the depths; there was an obscure craving for justice in this blackmailer’s hussy. It was like a cordial to me. I could not play with them any longer, could not torment them in their fear and their shame.

“All right,” I said, “two hundred crowns.”

They made no answer. I took out my note-case. I opened it slowly and ostentatiously. It would have been easy for any one of them to snatch it and be off. But they looked timidly away. Between them and me there was a

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

secret bond; no longer a struggle for mastery, but an understanding, mutual confidence, a human relationship. I detached two notes from the stolen bundle, and handed them to the nearest of the bullies.

"Thank you, Sir," he said in spite of himself, and turned to go.

It was plain that he felt how absurd it was to thank me for a blackmailer's gains. He was ashamed of himself for doing so, and I was sorry for him in his shame. I did not want him to feel shame before me, for I was a man of his own kidney; I was a thief just as much as he; I, too, was a coward and a weakling. His humiliation distressed me, and I wanted to restore his self-respect. I refused, therefore, to accept his thanks.

"It is my place to thank you," I replied, marvelling at my tone of genuine conviction. "If you had given me in charge I should have been ruined. I should have had to blow my brains out, and you would not have been any the richer. This is the best way out of the difficulty. Well, I shall take that turning to the right, and no doubt you'll be going in the opposite direction. Good night!"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then one of the men said good night, then the other, and last of all the girl, who had kept back in the shadows. These parting words were charged with a genuine sentiment of goodwill. Their voices showed me that they had in some sort taken a fancy to me, and that they would never forget the episode. It would recur to their minds on a day to come in penitentiary or hospital. Something had gone from me into them, and would live on in them; I had given them something. The joy of this giving was the most poignant feeling I had ever experienced.

I walked on alone towards the gate leading out of the Prater. My sense of oppression had been wholly lifted. The trees whispered to me, and I loved them. The stars

TRANSFIGURATION

shone down on me, and I rejoiced in their luminous greeting. Voices raised in song were audible in the distance; they were singing for me. Everything was mine, now that I had broken the shell in which I had been confined. The joy of giving, the joy of prodigality, united me with the world-all. "How easy," I thought, "to give joy and win joy! We need merely raise the sluices, and then from man to man the living current flows, thundering from the heights into the depths and foaming from the depths upwards into the infinite."

When I reached the exit from the Prater, I caught sight of an old woman sitting near the cab-stand—a hawker, wearily bent over her petty wares. She had some dusty cakes on her stall, and a little fruit. No doubt she had been there since morning to earn a few pence. "Why should you not enjoy yourself as well as I?" I thought, so I chose a cake and handed her a note. She started to fumble for the change, but I waved it away. She trembled with delight and astonishment, and began to pour out expressions of gratitude. Disregarding these, I went up to the horse which stood drooping between the shafts of her itinerant stall and offered him the cake. He nuzzled me in friendly fashion, as if he too would like to say thank you. Thereupon I was filled with the longing to dispense more pleasure, to learn more fully how easy it is to kill cares and diffuse cheerfulness with the aid of a few silver coins or some printed pieces of coloured paper. Why were there no beggars about? Where were the children who would like to have the air-balloons which that morose, white-haired old fellow was limping home with? He had a huge bundle of them tied to strings, and had obviously had a poor day's custom. I accosted him:

"Give me those balloons."

"Penny each," he said dubiously, for he could not

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

believe that a well-dressed idler would want to buy his coloured air-balloons at midnight.

"I'll take the lot," I said, and gave him a ten-crown note.

He positively staggered in his amazement, and then held out the cord to which the whole bundle was fastened. I felt the pull of it on my fingers. The balloons were longing for freedom, longing to fly skyward. Why should they not do what they wanted? I loosed the cord, and they rose like great tinted moons. People ran up laughing from all directions; pairs of lovers turned up out of the darkness; the cab-men cracked their whips, and called to one another as they pointed to the air-balloons sailing over the tree-tops and the roofs. Everyone made merry over my prank.

Why had I never known how easy it is and how enjoyable to give others pleasure? Once more the notes in my wallet began to burn me, they plucked at my fingers like the cord that had held the balloons? they, too, wanted to fly away into the unknown. I took them all out, not only the ones I had stolen from Lajos, but all the others I had with me, for I no longer recognized any difference between them, no longer felt that some of them were stained with crime. There they were, ready for anyone who wanted them. I went across to a street-sweeper who was listlessly cleaning up the deserted street. He fancied I was going to ask him the way, and looked at me surlily. Laughing, I offered him a twenty-crown note. He stared uncomprehendingly, but at length took the note, and waited to know what I wanted of him.

"Buy whatever you like with it," I said, and went on my way.

I peered in all directions, looking for someone who might ask a gift of me. Since no one did so, I had to make the offers. A prostitute accosted me, and I gave

TRANSFIGURATION

her a note. I handed two to a lamplighter. One I threw in at the area window of a bakery. Thus I made my progress, leaving a trail of surprise, gratitude and delight.

At last I began to throw the notes here, there, and everywhere—in the street, on the steps of a church. I smiled to think how the old apple-woman who had a stall there would find the hundred crowns in the morning and would praise God for the windfall. Some poor student, or maid-servant, or workman would pick up the notes with the same feeling of wonder and delight that animated me while scattering them abroad.

When I had got rid of the last of them, I felt incredibly lighthearted, almost as if I could fly, and I enjoyed a sense of freedom such as I had never before known. Towards the street, the sky, the houses, I had a new feeling of kinship. Never, up till now, even in the most ardent moments of my existence had I felt the reality of all these things so strongly—that they were alive and I was alive, and that the life in them and in me was the same life, the great and mighty life that can never be overfilled with happiness—the life that only one who loves and one who gives can understand.

I had one last moment of uneasiness. It was when I had turned the latchkey in my door and I glimpsed the dark entry to my own rooms. Suddenly there came over me a rush of anxiety lest this should be a re-entry into my earlier life, now that I was going back into the familiar dwelling, was about to get into the familiar bed, to resume associations with all the things from which, that night, I had been able to break away. The one thing needful was that I should not again become the man I had been; that I should no longer be the gentleman of yesterday, the slave of good form, who was unfeeling, and lived apart from the world. Better to plunge into the abysses of crime and horror, so long as I could be truly alive! I was tired out, and yet I dreaded sleep, for

I was afraid that during the sleep fervour, the sense of new life, would vanish. I dreaded lest the whole experience should prove as fugitive as a dream.

But I woke next morning in a cheerful mood, to find that the current of new feeling was still vigorous. Four months have passed since then, and there has been no return of the old stagnation. The amazing elation of that day, when I left all the traditional paths of my world to launch forth into the unknown, plunging into the abysses of life, giddy with speed, and intoxicated with delight—this climax of ardour is, indeed, over. Yet in all my hours since then I have never ceased to feel renewed pleasure in life. I know that I have been re-born, with other senses, responsive to other stimuli, and animated with a clearer consciousness. I cannot venture to judge whether I am a better man, but I know that I am a happier one. Life had grown cold and unmeaning; but now it has acquired a meaning, one for which I can find no other name than the very word “Life.” I have thrown off artificial restraints, for the rules and conventions of the society in which I was brought up have ceased to bind me. I am no longer ashamed either before others or before myself. Such words as honour, crime, and vice have grown hollow-sounding, and I find it distasteful to use them. My vital impetus comes from the power which I first recognized on that wonderful night. I do not know whither it is driving me: perchance towards a new abyss, towards what others call vice or crime; perchance towards something sublime. I neither know nor care to know. For I believe that he only is truly alive who does not seek to probe the mystery of the future.

Of one thing I am sure, that I have never loved life more keenly; and I know that whoever is indifferent to any of the forms and modes of life commits a crime (the only crime there is!). Since I have begun to under-

TRANSFIGURATION

stand myself, I understand enormously better all that goes on around me. The covetous glances of someone gazing in at a shop window can move me profoundly; the gambols of a dog can fill me with enthusiasm. I am interested in everything; nothing is indifferent to me. In the newspaper, which I used barely to glance at, I now read a hundred items with zest. Books which used to bore me now make a strong appeal. The strangest thing is that I can talk to my fellow human beings about other matters than those which form the substance of what, in good society, is termed "conversation." My manservant, who has been with me for seven years, interests me, and I often have a talk with him. The porter of the flats, whom I used to pass unheeding as if he had been one of the doorposts, told me the other day about the death of his little girl, and the recital moved me more than I have ever been moved by one of Shakespeare's tragedies. It would seem, too, though in outward semblance I still live the old life of respectable boredom, that the change in me must be obvious to others. People greet me far more cordially than of old; three times last week a strange dog came and fawned on me in the street. My friends look at me with affectionate pleasure, as one looks at a person who is convalescent from illness, and tell me that I have grown younger.

Have I grown younger? All I know is that I have only just begun to live. Oh, I know, too, of the everyday illusion. I know how apt people are to think that all their past has been error and preparation. Doubtless it is arrogant to take a cold pen into my warm, living hand, and to write upon the dry paper that at length I am really alive. But even if it be an illusion, it is the first illusion that has made me happy, the first that has warmed my blood and unlocked my senses. If I sketch here the miracle of my awakening, I do it for myself alone, though I know it all better than words can describe. I have not

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

spoken of the matter to any of my friends: they never knew how dead I had become; they will never guess how my life has blossomed afresh. Nor am I perturbed by the thought that death's hand may suddenly be laid upon this living life of mine, and that these lines may be read by other eyes. Those who have never known the magic of such an hour as I have described, will understand just as little as I could have understood six months ago how the fugitive and almost inconsequent happenings of one afternoon and evening could so have touched my life to flame. The thought of such a reader does not shame me, for he will not understand what I have written. But one who understands will not judge, and will have no pride. Before him I shall not be ashamed. Whoever has found himself can never again lose anything in this world. He who has grasped the human in himself understands all mankind.

FEAR

IRENE came down the stairs leading from her lover's flat. Once again, as so many times before, she was overwhelmed by an unwarrantable fear. Her eyes flickered, her knees felt like putty, and she had to lean heavily upon the banister to save herself from falling. How well she knew the feeling! Almost on every occasion she had ventured to visit her lover, these fits of unreasonable fear had submerged her on leaving. Yet the way thither was far more thickly strewn with dangers. It was ridiculous of her to feel like this after the tryst. If she had felt nervous beforehand, that would have been understandable, for she came to the rendezvous in a taxi which she left waiting at the corner of the street while she scuttled along furtively to her beloved's dwelling and scurried up to his flat. What anxiety she experienced then was soon forgotten in the imperishable hours spent with her dear. But when arrived the moment for going home—then—oh, then—a strange horror, a sense of guilt, a kind of madness invaded her, and the street seemed to cock its eye at her and ask why she was so troubled. The last few minutes spent in his company were poisoned with the premonition of this uneasiness. As she took her leave, quivering with impatience to be gone, she could scarcely heed his parting words and would fend off his farewell endearments, eager to get away and be back again in the comfortable life of middle-class respectability she was used to. He would comfort her and speak enheartening phrases which in her excitement she failed to hear for suspense lest someone should

meet her as she rejoined the cab. Was anybody coming upstairs or going down? She listened from behind the shelter of her lover's door. But fear lay in ambush on the next landing, ready to pounce upon her, and seized her so roughly that by the time she reached the hall she was panting for breath.

To-day, she stood for a while drinking in the cooler air rising from below in the darkened staircase. A door banged. Instinctively, she drew her hat down on to her forehead and lowered her veil while she made for the exit. Like a diver preparing for the plunge, she tucked in her chin and dashed towards the half-open entry. As she was crossing the threshold, she collided with another female, uttered a crestfallen, "Beg your pardon," and tried to slink by. But the female spread out two long arms and barred Irene's passage. A harsh voice issued from the creature, and mocking, despiteful words:

"So I've caught you at last, my fine lady. Just what I expected! Not satisfied with your husband, your wealth, and all the rest of it, but must come stealing a poor girl's lover and . . ."

"You are mistaken," muttered Irene, endeavouring to get by. Whereupon the female thrust her bulky form into the doorway, thus blocking it as a cork block's a bottleneck, and continued haranguing.

"No, no," she cried shrilly, "I'm not mistaken. I know you. I know you have just this minute come from Edward's rooms. He's my very own and particular friend, see? Now I've caught you, now I know why he can spare so little time for me lately. It's you, you mean baggage . . ."

"For heaven's sake," interrupted Irene in a toneless voice, "don't scream like that."

She stepped back into the hall, while the female stared at her with scornful eyes. Irene's tell-tale fear, her utter helplessness, seemed to do her aggressor good, for the

FEAR

woman looked her victim up and down with a taunting and satisfied smile wrinkling the corners of her mouth. Modifying her voice, she reflected aloud:

"That's what she looks like, this noble dame, this married lady, who comes filching other people's men. Veiled, of course; veiled so she can't be recognized, and can go on playing the respectable lady in high society . . ."

"What do you want?" asked Irene. "I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, and I really must be going. . . ."

"Going? Naturally you must be going—back to your worthy spouse, eh? Back to a cosy room, hot bath, and be dressed by your maid so as to be ready to receive your high and mighty guests. But you don't care tuppence if a person like me dies of hunger . . . you'll steal the last, the very last treasure I own. . . ."

Irene dug her hand into her bag and pulled out nearly all the notes it contained. Thrusting the wad into the woman's hand, she said huskily:

"There, there . . . take these . . . and now let me pass. I shall never come here again . . . I promise. . . ."

The female accepted the money, twisting her face into a malignant grin.

"Dirty bitch," was all she said as she made way for Irene.

The latter wilted under the words, and precipitated herself down the street much as a suicide might hurl herself from a tower. Faces like tattered masks rushed by her while she made all speed to rejoin the taxi waiting round the corner. Her body felt leaden. She crumpled up on the springy seat, her mind a blank, her lips rigid. The driver, surprised at not receiving any orders, at length turned his head and asked: "Where to, Ma'am?" Irene looked blankly at him for a moment. Then, making a supreme effort, she managed to say:

"To the station."

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

Suddenly the thought of that female pursuing her flashed through her mind, and she added:

“Quick! Quick! Drive as quickly as you can.”

During the drive she came to realize how profoundly the meeting had agitated her. Her hands were stiff and cold; they looked like dead things hanging from her wrists; then a shiver ran down her back, and she shook all over. There was a choking sensation in her throat, a bitter taste in her mouth, clammy perspiration on her brow; she felt sickened. She wanted to scream or to strike out with her fists in order to rid herself of the horrible memory. But it stuck like a fish-hook in her brain. Oh, that dreadful face, distorted and jeering, the commonness, the vulgarity of it, the onion-laden breath so frequent among working-class women, that shapeless mouth which had spoken the coarse words, and the red-denied hands raised threateningly. . . . Nauseated and miserable, she jolted up and down while the taximan pressed the accelerator. She was about to ask him to drive a trifle slower when she remembered having given most of her cash to the blackmailer. Had she enough whereabouts to pay? Yes, thank goodness! But her available money would not suffice to take her so far as the station. She called to the driver to pull up, and astonished him by springing out and dismissing him. She would have to walk home. The neighbourhood where the man had deposited her was unknown to her, and the shops and passers-by with their rough speech distressed her unspeakably. Her knees still trembled with her recent panic, so that she found it difficult to walk. Still, she had to get home somehow. Summoning her flagging energies to the rescue, she crept along from street to street, walking slowly and heavily as if she were wading through snow. At last she reached her house, and was about to rush up the steps when she remembered that undue haste would arouse suspicion.

FEAR

In the hall, the maid relieved her of her coat. From upstairs came the sound of her boy's voice at play with his little sister. The things that surrounded her were her own, they conveyed a sense of security, and gave her back the mask of self-possession she so urgently needed. She smoothed the troubled look from her brow and eyes with the tips of her fingers, assumed an innocent air, and went into the dining-room where the table was set for the evening meal. Here she found her husband reading his paper.

"You are late, my darling, very late," he said with a note of tender reproach in his voice. Then he got up and kissed her affectionately on the cheek.

This produced in her a renewed feeling of guilt, which she found it difficult to hide. They took their places, and the man, from behind his paper, asked casually:

"What kept you so long?"

"I . . . I was having a chat . . . with Emily . . . and she had some shopping to do . . . so I went with her."

What an ass not to have prepared a sensible story! Irene was furious with herself for telling so clumsy a lie. Usually she had concocted a plausible tale beforehand; but to-day fear had made her forget. . . . Suppose he . . .

"What's up, Irene, my dear?" he husband inquired. "You seem quite flurried; and why are you dining in your hat?"

Her hand darted up to the incriminating headgear. Caught again, she thought, as she went to her room to make herself more presentable. How restless her eyes looked in the mirror. She must get hold of herself. A few minutes sufficed, and then she rejoined her husband.

The maid served them their meal, and thenceforward the evening ran its usual course. Perhaps the couple were a little more chary of words, and a little less companionable than ordinary; when they did exchange a few remarks, these came hesitatingly. Irene's thoughts

went wool-gathering, and if she managed to think consecutively at all she invariably retraced her way to that dreadful encounter. Then she would raise her eyes and look around at the familiar objects with which her home was furnished. Such contemplation brought solace to mind and heart. The things were associated with pleasant memories, she felt tender and loving towards them, and peace returned to her soul. The clock broke the silence with its leisurely ticking, and this rhythmical sound acted like a sedative to her jangled nerves, calming her, and bringing her fevered pulse-beats back to the normal.

Next morning, after her husband had gone to his office and the children had been sent for a walk, Irene found a moment of leisure, the first since that disastrous meeting. She rallied, and was at length able to throw off the incubus of fear which had weighed so heavily upon her. She recalled that her veil was a specially thick one, and that the woman could not possibly have discerned any features behind its opacity. Easy, therefore, to take the necessary precautions. Never again would she visit her lover in his own quarters. Thus might she be safeguarded from a repetition of yesterday's adventure. As for that "female," it was unlikely she had followed the taxi, or dogged Irene's wanderings as far as the house-door. She had nothing to fear for the nonce. But even suppose the creature had found some means of discovering Irene's identity and address, there remained other methods of defence. Now that Irene was no longer under the immediate pressure of fear, she could think her course of action out clearly. Nothing easier than flatly to give the lie to every accusation, and if matters came to the worst she would denounce the woman as a blackmailer. It must be remembered that Irene was the wife of one of the ablest of barristers, and through long years of associa-

FEAR

tion had come to know a few points of the law. From what she had picked up during her husband's talks with his colleagues at the bar, she had learned that any form of blackmail was dealt with stringently.

The first thing to do was to write the briefest note possible to her lover saying that she would be unable to see him for several days. Her pride was mortified by the discovery that her predecessor in Karl Brustmann's affections was of such common clay. Now, as she wrote, she deliberately chose words which would convey the impression—wounding to a sensitive heart—that she had entered into the relationship coldbloodedly and as the outcome of a whim. Such was the fact!

She had met the young man, a pianist by profession, at an evening party; and, hardly realizing what was happening, had become his mistress. There had been nothing specially attractive about him, she had felt no passion for him, and there existed no particular spiritual sympathy between the pair to account for the liaison. Irene had given herself to him without any sensuous desire on her part, but, rather, because she was too indolent to oppose his will. Besides, she had been vaguely curious to discover what the youth's love-making would be like. Her marriage was a happy one, and she did not require a lover to gratify her intellectual, moral, or bodily needs. These things her husband fulfilled amply. In addition she had two charming children, and led a comfortable and protected life. But an existence which is rendered too easy is often as hard to bear contentedly as one that is positively unhappy. Satiety is as difficult to stomach as hunger, and it was precisely this utter security which rendered Irene eager for an adventure.

When, therefore, the young pianist made it obvious that he coveted her as a woman and wooed her in that spirit, this was a pleasant and exciting relief to the banal flattery and the respectful attitude of her habitual male

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

entourage. She had not been so strongly moved since she was a girl. The most alluring attribute the musician possessed was a veil of melancholy which overcast his countenance as he sat playing the piano amid a circle of well-fed and self-satisfied society men and women. In despite of her better inspiration, Irene felt compelled to step beyond the frontiers of her customary feelings and to study this drooping aspect more closely. Something vehement and unusual in the words she chose to express her appreciation of the artist's performance caused him to look up from the keyboard and gaze at the speaker. Already in that first glance Irene felt a grip at her heart. She was alarmed, and yet she revelled in her fear. They exchanged a few words, meaningless in themselves, but charged with inner significance for the two human beings who spoke. Her interest and curiosity were so strongly aroused that she looked forward to a further meeting when Brustmann gave his next recital. Thereafter, they saw one another frequently, and certainly not by chance. Her vanity was deliciously tickled when, a few weeks later, he proposed that she should be the first to hear a composition he had recently been at work on. A genuine, an acknowledged master and artist was asking her to act as judge of his creation. This seemed almost too good to be true. She agreed to meet him at his rooms. Maybe on either side they had arranged the tryst with the best intentions, but it nevertheless ended in kisses and in her yielding to his desire. On coming to her senses, Irene had been amazed at such a sudden and unforeseen denouement. She had never meant to break her marriage vows. She felt guilty, and yet she was proud of having consciously—as she believed—overstepped the code of smug respectability which encompassed her. Her wickedness appalled her; nevertheless she came to experience a certain pride in her exploit. But even this strange excitement was ephemeral. Instinctively she felt antagonistic

FEAR

to her lover, and especially to what was novel in him, to the attribute which had enthralled her at the outset. He was a man who put a formidable amount of passion into his pianoforte playing, and in his love-life he was no less impulsive. This excessive and masterful procedure disquieted her, and she involuntarily compared such unrestraint with the reverential approaches of her husband, who was shy and considerate even after a good many years of married life.

Still, since she had once been unfaithful to her legal spouse, it was easier and easier to continue seeking her lover's ardours. These encounters did not add to her happiness, nor was she in any way disillusioned. She expected no better, being activated merely by a sense of duty towards her paramour, and by a certain lassitude which inhibited her from changing what soon became a habit. After a month or so of intimacy, the young man fitted neatly into the general pattern of her existence like part of a mosaic—just as did the weekly visit to her parents-in-law, or any other social obligation. She relinquished nothing of her orderly life to this new love of hers; it became a mere addition to the familiar routine. What pleasure Karl added to her experiences was no more than might have been provided by a third child or by an automobile. Very soon the adventure was no more exhilarating to her than the permitted pleasures of connubial bliss.

At the first hint of danger, Irene recognized the scant value of such a relationship. Fate had, so far, dealt kindly with her. From earliest childhood she had been cosseted and spoiled by her parents, whose circumstances were so easy that the girl could have anything her heart desired. Thus mollycoddled, she had become soft, and the faintest zephyr heralding a possible storm ruffled the fair pool of her equanimity. She felt no inclination to sacrifice a jot of her personal comfort to a lover. . . .

That same afternoon she got an answer from young Karl. It was an excited and overwrought epistle, wherein he pleaded and reproached. This disturbed her again, and she was no longer quite so sure that she would put an end to the liaison, since the man's plain-spoken passion flattered her vanity and she was fascinated by his ecstatic despair. Brustmann besought her to grant him at least one last interview so that he might learn wherein he had been remiss, if he had unwittingly offended her. This suggested a fresh amusement to Irene. She might keep him dangling, uncertain as to her feelings, and thus render herself more precious to him. With such a notion in mind, she gave him an appointment at a tea-room where, as a girl, she had once met a certain actor she had had a fleeting pash for. How paltry that youthful enthusiasm appeared to her in retrospect, after she had been married for several years and had acquired a lover in addition to her legitimate spouse. "Strange," she mused, "if romance is once more to enter my life." Irene felt almost happy, now that she had stumbled upon "that creature," for it was ages since she had experienced anything like so strong an emotion. Her all-too-placid nerves were agreeably stimulated, and she felt decidedly refreshed.

She was careful to put on a dark gown for the present meeting, and a different hat, in order that, should occasion demand, the "creature" might be puzzled as to her identity. Further, Irene took up a veil wherein to mask her features, but as she was about to arrange it a momentary defiance led her to thrust it back into the drawer. Why should she, a respectable and respected woman, not venture forth openly into the streets? At bottom she had nothing to fear.

And yet fear clutched at her heart as she stepped forth from the safety of her home. She shivered, like a

FEAR

swimmer who has tested the water with a toe and found it exceeding chill. This passed, and was followed by a glow. The adventure was a joyful one after all, and her step was elastic, her bearing gallant. Irene's only regret was that the tea-room was so near to her dwelling. Once under way, she could have walked far to the accompaniment of the magnetic cadence of her own footfalls. Still, there was no time to linger; the hour for the meeting had struck, and she knew that her lover would be awaiting her. He was seated in a retired corner, restlessly eyeing the door, and sprang to his feet the moment she entered. His excitement was pleasurable to Irene, and at the same time a trifle irritating, for she had to warn him to moderate his voice and the tumult of words which gushed from his lips. Without telling him in plain terms the reasons for her decision to cease seeing him, she hinted at this, that, and the other cause, and only succeeded in making him more ardent than ever. She remained adamant so far as young Karl's wishes were concerned, not even holding out any hope, for she recognized that her sudden and apparently groundless refusal merely served to enhance the artist's desire. She took leave of him after half an hour of fevered argument, refused him a chance of showing the slightest tenderness, vouchsafed no promise as to future meetings, and betook herself home with a glow at her heart she had not enjoyed since her girlhood. It seemed as though a tiny flame glimmered deep down in her being, and that it needed but a puff to convert it into an all-consuming fire. She treasured every appreciative look that was cast in her direction as she marched homeward; never before had she been aware of men's admiration to the same extent. So moved was she, that at last she felt impelled to stop in front of a flower-shop and study her face in the mirror. There she contemplated with immense satisfaction the reflection of her own beauty, framed in a garland of red roses and dew-

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

sprayed violets. Not since girlhood days had she felt so light-hearted, so sensuously happy; not in the early months of her marriage, not even when in the arms of her lover, had her body quivered with such dancing delight, such buoyancy, such irrepressible joyance. It was insufferable, she thought, to have to waste this sweet intoxication, and revert to a hum-drum existence. Thereupon she discovered that she was tired, and trailed home as best she might. At the front door she stood still for a moment trying to recapture the aroma of her late adventure. She threw back her shoulders and breathed deeply.

A tug at her sleeve brought her to earth with a rush. Irene turned on her heel.

“What . . . what on earth do you want, bothering me again like this?” she asked petulantly, struck with a sudden chill as she recognized the hateful figure of her persecutor.

Hardly had she uttered the words when she bit her lip in dismay. She had betrayed herself irremediably. Had she not determined to cut the creature if any further molestation occurred? Now it was too late. She had completely given herself away, and the female could run to all eternity.

“I’ve been waiting for you close on an hour, Frau Wagner. . . .”

So the blackmailer had discovered Irene’s name and address! But how? All was lost!

“Yes, close on an hour, Frau Wagner,” repeated the woman with a menace and a reproach in her voice.

“What do you want?”

“You know very well, Frau Wagner. You know as well as I do why I’ve come.”

“But I’ve not seen him since . . . I told you I wasn’t going to see him again . . . never . . .”

“No use telling a pack of lies. I followed you to the tea-

FEAR

room. You see, I'm out of work, and had nothing better to do. Got the chuck because, so the boss said, business was bad. It's nice to have a bit of time to spare for a walk, just as if I was a fine lady."

She spoke with such icy malice that Irene's heart froze. The woman's brazen vulgarity left her defenceless and an easy prey. Again that sense of unutterable fear submerged her. Suppose the creature spoke loud enough for the servants to hear? Suppose Herr Wagner should pass by? Hastily pulling out her purse—a pretty bauble made of silver links—she emptied the contents into the coarse hand. But the hand, instead of closing over the money, remained outstretched like the claw of a rapacious bird.

"Best give me the purse as well so's I don't lose the cash," came from the mocking mouth, accompanied by a gust of hoarse laughter.

Irene stared her tormentress squarely in the face. Physically and mentally she felt nauseated. Oh, to be rid of the past as quickly as possible! Turning aside so as not to have to look again into those jeering eyes, Irene thrust the costly purse into the woman's reddened paw, slammed the door, and fled up the stairs.

Herr Wagner had not come home yet. She had time for a rest, and flung herself on to her bed. There she lay motionless, as if felled by an axe. But directly she heard her husband's voice in the hall, she sprang up, and went automatically into the dining-room. All the life had been taken out of her.

Dame Care henceforward became an inmate of Irene's home; she sat day after day by Irene's side, and followed the young woman from room to room. As one empty hour succeeded another, Irene had more than enough time to recapitulate the details of each meeting. How could "that person" have discovered her name and address? Certain it was that, since the first attempts at

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

blackmail had proved so successful, others would follow. For years upon years this burden of misery would weigh upon her shoulders. She saw no end to it. Besides though she had a fortune in her own right and her husband was well endowed with this world's goods, how would she be able to raise the large sum necessary to be quit of the blackmailer unless she took Herr Wagner into her confidence? Again—so much she had learned from the lawsuits her husband had been connected with—such persons, even when paid what they claimed, were not to be trusted to make no further attempts to procure additional hush-money. You might possibly find peace for a month or so, but then the wretched business would begin anew. And if you made up your mind to denounce the ill-omened bird of prey, shame and discredit would descend upon yourself and your whole household. Thus the satisfaction of bringing the blackmailer to book would be trifling compared with the smashing up of home and self.

What was going to happen? Irene cogitated this question from morning till night. She fancied that one day a letter would come addressed to her husband, that after reading it his brows would pucker and his face turn ashen, that he might seize her by the arm, question her. . . . Yes, but what then? What would he do? Her imagination refused to work any longer. Fear, a horrible and irrational fear, overmastered her. She simply did not know, and her every conjecture exploded like a pricked bubble. Her meditations brought her to a realization of how very slight was her knowledge of her husband's character, of how little she could guess the way in which he would react to circumstances. Her parents and his had arranged the marriage, and she had entered into the union without putting up the slightest opposition. After eight years of matrimony, she found no reason to regret the choice. They had been leisurely, happy years;

FEAR

she had given birth to two children, had created a comfortable home, and had enjoyed innumerable hours of physical companionship with her husband. Yet now that she tried to divine what his attitude might be to certain issues, she found herself at a loss. For the first time she began to analyse her husband's disposition, attempted to fathom the main aspects of his character, to recall little incidents which might elucidate him. The deeper she delved, the more did fear oppress her. . . .

He sat reading, his face brightly illuminated by the electric lamp. It seemed to her that she was looking at a stranger. His massive and noble brow reflected the energy of his mental activity; his mouth was perhaps too firm, and bespoke an excess of severity and a lack of the power to yield. Manly features, full of strength, in which she was surprised to discover beauty. Irene would have liked to look into his eyes, but they were cast downward upon the book he was reading. She felt sure they would have revealed more than the whole of the rest of his person. They must hide the real secret of his character. She gazed, wonderingly, at his profile. Would he dismiss her backsliding with a caution? Or would he condemn her? . . . The man was a stranger; the clean-cut profile alarmed her; and yet it was a beautiful profile, as she recognized for the first time in all these years. . . . It was a pleasure merely to look at him, a pleasure which filled her with pride. . . . He suddenly lifted his eyes, and Irene shrank back into the dark so that the ardent question in her own gaze might not betray her.

For three days she did not leave the house. The servants began to wonder at this sudden change in her habits. Her children, too, and especially the boy, noticed that Mummy never went out now, and asked her why. The governess talked the thing over with anyone who was willing to listen. Irene did her best to appear

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

natural and cheerful, as if nothing unusual was taking place. She even tried to occupy herself in house-wifely tasks, but merely succeeded in hindering, and in arousing suspicion. Instead of staying quietly in one room reading or sewing, fear made her restless, so that she had to keep perpetually on the go. She started and flushed every time the telephone burred or the front-door bell sounded. Her quiet existence was thus disrupted; and she contemplated the future with anguish, seeing no way out of her wretchedness. The three days of confinement to the house dragged so wearily that they seemed immensely longer than the eight years of her married life.

Then, on the third evening, she remembered that a longstanding engagement fell due. She recalled the fact too late to be able, civilly, to put the thing off. Besides, if she were not to founder completely, she must make an effort to break down the wall of dread that was rising around her. Human companionships, a few hours' respite from brooding, from this suicidal solitude of fear—these she felt were essential to her sanity. Furthermore, the best concealment was surely among friends, in another house than her own.

A pang gripped her heart as she crossed the threshold to go into the street. Was the person spying out the land? She linked her hand in her husband's arm, closed her eyes, stepped briskly over the pavement, and sank back in the waiting automobile. As the car glided swiftly along, she was able at length to throw off her terrors, and on arrival at her friend's house she began to feel safe, protected from harm. For a couple of hours she could be her natural self, just the care-free, happy young woman of yore, but with the superimposed delight of a prisoner released from jail. No persecution could reach her here, hatred would not pursue her within these walls; she was among people who loved her, who respected her, people

FEAR

who were well dressed and bejewelled, men and women who dwelt for ever in the rosy atmosphere of enjoyment, who danced light-heartedly through life and who carried Irene, too, along on the current of gaiety and laughter. She was more than content, for as she made her entry leaning on her husband's arm, she knew, from the looks of admiration cast upon her by her fellow-guests, that she was beautiful. Her consciousness of this fresh loveliness of hers put an added glow to her charms.

Strains of music came from a neighbouring room, and the sound penetrated deep beneath her burning flesh. People were beginning to dance; and, almost before she was aware, Irene found herself swept into the mass of whirling couples. Every atom of heaviness disappeared from her limbs, her body was nothing but rhythm and ardent movement. When the band stopped, the silence weighed upon her spirits; but no sooner had it struck up afresh, than the cooling waters of oblivion enveloped her once more, and the ache at her heart was cured as her partner carried her forward among the swaying multitude. She had never been more than a mediocre dancer, too careful as to her steps, too circumspect, too restrained; but in the joyful flood of her newly won freedom, all shackles were broken, and she danced as though inspired. Her blood responded to the arm which encircled her, to the hands which touched her, to the words whispered in her ear, to the gay laughter, to the music. Her body was so lusty with joy that her gown actually felt too tight, and she would gladly have thrown aside every shred of vesture in order, naked as God made her, to relish the full tide of her present intoxication.

“Irene, what's up, my dear?”

She swung round, her eyes beaming, her gait slightly unsteady, to encounter the reproving eye of her husband. Had she let herself go too insanely? Had she betrayed herself?

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

"I don't understand . . . Fritz," she stammered, once more a prey to fear.

His steely glance bored into her, so that she could have cried aloud in her pain.

"You are not yourself," he muttered, after a long pause.

There was a note of amazement in his voice, but she had not the courage to ask what he meant to imply. He turned away without another word, and a shudder passed over her as she contemplated those massive shoulders, and the neck above. "Like a murderer," flew through her mind. She was no longer mistress of herself. Her own husband—how horrible—was dangerous and strong. . . .

Music again. Mechanically, she accepted the partner who offered himself. Now she felt leaden-footed, and the cheerful melody could no longer lift her as on wings. Every step was torture to her soul. She begged to be excused. As she slipped from the man's enfolding arm, she glanced over her shoulder, and lo, there stood her husband, as if waiting for her to join him, and still with that challenge in his eyes. What did he want? Had he guessed? She drew the folds of her dress about her, to shield her bosom from his gaze. His obstinate silence was more than she could bear.

"Shall we go?" she inquired anxiously.

"Yes."

His voice was harsh and unfriendly. He went before, while she followed meekly in his wake. Again she became conscious of those menacing shoulders, that stubborn neck. Someone helped her into her furs, but she shivered as she and her husband drove home in unrelieved silence. Danger threatened on all sides—of that she felt sure.

That same night Irene had a most depressing dream.

FEAR

Strange music filled the air, a big room brilliantly lighted, she went in, there were many people and many colours, a young man approached her, his features seemed familiar and yet she found it difficult to place him, he put his arm round her, they danced together. She felt happy, the music made her so light-footed that she seemed to flit over the polished floor like a bird. Thus they were wafted along through many halls lighted with golden chandeliers that swung so high as to appear like constellations in the sky. Her smiling visage was reflected back to her from a hundred mirrors, and was then reflected again into the infinite. The dance grew increasingly animated, the music more ardent. She became aware that the young man was pressing closer and closer to her, that his hand sought her naked arm, that she herself sighed with pleasure at his touch, and that, as she searched his eyes, she recognized him—the actor she had worshipped at a distance when she was a little girl. She was about to utter his name, when he closed her lips with a burning kiss. Thus enlaced they floated from room to room, as thistledown is borne upon the wind. The walls streamed by, and, so far as she knew, the ceilings no longer existed. Time had ceased to count; she felt inexpressibly buoyant, her limbs no longer earth-bound. Then someone tapped her on the shoulder. She paused, the band paused, the lights went out, the dark walls closed in upon her, all the dancers vanished. "Give him back to me, you thief!" cried the female she dreaded, closing ice-cold fingers round her wrist. Irene mustered her faculties to the combat. The two women wrestled together, but "that person" was stronger, and plucked the pearl necklace from her neck and half her pretty gown from her body so that arms and breasts were exposed. Then the room filled with people flocking from every point of the compass, people who stared at her derisively while the woman screamed: "She stole him from me,

adulteress, whore!" Irene knew not where to hide, where to look, for the throng clustered round her, curious, trying to touch her naked flesh. She looked in every direction for aid, and became aware of her husband standing in the shadowy doorway. He kept motionless. His right hand was hidden behind his back. With a cry of alarm, she fled from room to room pursued by the motley crowd. As she ran, her dress fell away from her, and there remained no more than a few rags which she clutched at to veil her nudity. She burst open a door, dashed down a flight of stairs. Now she was saved. But no! At the bottom stood that awful woman in her rough woollen dress and with her coarse, red hands. Springing to one side, Irene ran like a hare with the other close at her heels. The chase went on down endless streets, while the lamps leaned forward to grin. Irene heard the clatter of the woman's cheap shoes behind, and yet at every corner she met with the creature's leering face. The female spectre lurked behind every house, always pursuing and always in advance, multiplying herself incessantly, springing on to her victim, grappling with her, until the hunted Irene felt her knees giving way. At last she reached her house, leapt to the door, and wrenched it open. There stood Fritz, a knife in hand, his piercing eyes upon her. "Where have you been?" he asked dully. "Nowhere," she heard herself saying, when a shrill laugh interposed, and a common voice said: "I saw her! I saw her!" Fritz raised the knife to strike. "Help," cried Irene. "Help!"

She sat up in bed and blinked her eyes. There was her husband staring at her uneasily. He had turned on the light. So she was at home, and all this had been a dream. But why was Fritz sitting on the edge of her bed and looking at her as though she were a sick woman? Who had switched on the light? Why did he sit motionless and dumb? Fear transfixed her. She glanced down at his

FEAR

hand. There was no knife in it. Slowly the mists of sleep rose from her brain. A dream, nothing but a dream in which she had called aloud for aid and had awakened him. But why was he gazing at her so intently?

She tried to laugh.

“What’s up? Why this serious mien? I’ve only had a nightmare.”

“You cried in your sleep. I heard you from the next room.”

“What could I have said? How much does he know?” Thus ran her thoughts. Irene dared not look him straight in the eyes. But he was unwontedly quiet in demeanour, and merely continued to gaze down at her without a smile.

“What’s the matter with you, Irene? Something’s wrong, I feel sure. You’ve not been yourself these three or four days past. Seems as if you had a touch of fever, you’re so excitable, so unstable, and calling as you just did for help in your sleep. . . .”

Again she endeavoured to laugh the matter off.

“No,” he continued. “You must not hide anything from me. Got anything on your mind? Someone bothering you? The whole household has noticed the change in you. Trust me, Irene, my dear.”

He slid nearer to her, and she felt his fingers caressing her bare arm, while his eyes were aflame with a strange light. She longed to cling to his strong body, to make a clean breast of her troubles, now, at this very moment, when he knew that she was suffering.

But the electric lamp shone down so unsympathetically, illuminating her face so vividly, that shame overwhelmed her.

“Don’t worry, Fritz,” she said, again trying to force a laugh. A shiver ran the length of her body. “I’m just a trifle overwrought. It’ll pass.”

The hand which had been ready for an embrace with-

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

drew abruptly. His face was ashen. His brow clouded with gloomy thoughts. Slowly, he rose to his feet.

"I don't know why, but these last few days, I've felt, somehow, that you wanted to tell me . . . A matter that concerns you and me . . . just you and me. We are quite alone now, Irene . . ."

She lay motionless, hypnotized by his steady stare. How lovely, she thought, to speak two little words, and all would be well between them. "Forgive me." He would not question further. But the electric light shone down on her so pitilessly . . . In the dark, she felt she could have made full confession. The crude light sapped her strength.

"So you have nothing, absolutely nothing to tell me?"

His voice was muted and tender. The temptation to confide her troubles to him was great. Only there was that soul-destroying light. . . .

She shrugged, saying:

"I don't know what you're driving at," and the spurious cheerfulness of the laugh she achieved struck her as terrible. "Because my sleep is a little disturbed you fancy I've a secret. What nonsense! Perhaps you even suspect me of having a lover."

Irene herself was aghast at the false ring of the words, and she turned her eyes away.

"All right. Sleep well," he said curtly. His voice had lost its tenderness, and was sharp, as if charged with a threat.

He switched off the light. Irene saw his white silhouette in the doorway; he vanished noiselessly, like a ghost, and when he closed the door, it seemed to her that someone was screwing her into a coffin. The world was dead, her body hollow, save for the furious beating of her heart. Pain, pain—pain, pain—throbbed with every pulse.

FEAR

As she sat at luncheon with her husband and children next day—the youngsters had just been pacified after a violent quarrel—the parlourmaid brought in a letter.

“It’s for you, Ma’am,” said Lizzie, “and the man’s waiting for an answer.”

Irene tore open the envelope, and her cheeks blanched as she read the brief message: “Please give bearer one hundred crowns.” Neither date nor signature; and the note was written in an assumed handwriting, that was patent.

Frau Wagner hastened to her room to fetch the money. But she had mislaid the key to her cash-box. She rummaged one drawer after another till she found it. With trembling fingers she folded the bank-notes, placed them in an envelope, and herself handed the package to the messenger. All these actions were done as if she were in a hypnotic trance; there was never a moment’s hesitation between one movement and the next. Barely two minutes had elapsed since she had left her seat at the dining-table.

Irene slipped back into her place. The family stared at her in stony silence. She was about to turn off the awkward situation with a joke, when, glancing down, she beheld with horror the note, open for all who wished to read, lying beside her plate. Her fingers closed on it stealthily, and she hid it away in her pocket. Then her eyes met those of her husband fixed upon her with a piercing, reproachful, tortured expression such as she had never seen on his face before. She felt as if a rapier had pricked her heart. How could she parry such a thrust? He had glared at her last night at the party with just the same piercing look; it was the identical look, too, which had hung like a sword over her sleep. She tried vainly to think of something plausible to say. Then, a long-forgotten memory stole into her mind. Fritz had once told her that he had acted as counsel for the

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

defence in a case where the public prosecutor had a special way of dealing with recalcitrant witnesses. He made as if he were very short-sighted, and buried his nose in the legal documents lying before him on the table. Then, as the decisive question was put, he would suddenly raise his eyes and fix the offender with a dagger-like stare which so alarmed the culprit that all the carefully elaborated pack of lies was scattered to the four winds of heaven. Was Fritz trying the same dodge on her? She was the more aghast because she knew how keen an interest he took in the psychological aspect of his profession—an interest far beyond the ordinary. Tracking down crime, finding out its motives and the method of its execution, were as absorbing to him as is the hazard of the dice to a gambler, the pursuit of Eros to the habitual seducer. When he was at this game of psychological sleuth-hound, the entire man glowed like a brazier. He remained in a high state of nervous tension unable to eat or drink, roused from his sleep at night by the pressure of some hitherto unsolved riddle. Smoking inordinately during the days preceding the trial, he would be chary of words, reserving himself for the great hour ahead when he would have to stand at the bar and fulfil the part assigned him for prosecution or defence. She had once been present at a civil trial where he acted on behalf of the plaintiff. She could never be induced to go into court again, so horrified was she by the passionate, well-nigh evil fervour of his eloquence and the cruel glint in his eyes. Now, it was she herself, his wife, who had to suffer the scrutiny of those piercing eyes.

These memories flashed back in a second of time, and they killed the words which rose to her lips. Irene sat silent, and her confusion grew in proportion as she realized how dangerous such a silence was for her. Happily, the meal soon came to an end. The children

FEAR

ran shouting into the day-nursery, and made so much noise that the governess had to call them to order. Herr Wagner, likewise, rose, and went into his study without looking round.

She was alone. Drawing the fateful note from her pocket, Irene read it again: "Please give bearer one hundred crowns." Rage overcame her; she crumpled the paper into a tight ball and hurled it into the waste-paper basket. Then a thought came to her. She bent down and picked up the incriminating document, went to the stove, and dropped the paper into the flames. The loathsome thing curled and wriggled as the greedy fire licked it up. Relieved from this immediate menace, Irene prepared in her turn to leave the room.

But her intention was frustrated, for at that moment she heard footsteps approaching down the passage. Her husband stood at the door. Her face was flushed by the heat from the stove, and now she blushed deeper at being caught. The trap of the stove was still open, and she made a clumsy endeavour to hide the fact by standing in front of it. Fritz struck a match in order to light his cigar, and, as the little flame lighted up his face by fits and starts, Irene thought that his nostrils were quivering. This, she knew, meant that he was angry. Nevertheless, he looked at her calmly enough as he said:

"I came back to tell you that you are not bound to give me your private letters to read. You are perfectly free to have secrets apart from me if you wish."

Irene remained tongue-tied, and dared not raise her eyes. He waited a second or two, then he blew the cigar smoke through his lips with violence, and slowly left the room.

Frau Wagner did not wish to think any more. She wanted to be left in peace, and to fill her life with senseless occupations. The house had become unbearable.

She longed to go out, to be with friends ; otherwise, she knew she would go mad with fear. Surely the hundred crowns would keep her tormentress quiet for a few days? A walk might do her good. Besides, there was some necessary shopping which would relieve her from the close observation of her household—for she recognized clearly that they were all of them puzzled by her eccentric behaviour. She had adopted a very peculiar way of leaving the house. Standing for a moment upon the threshold, she closed her eyes and plunged into the current of the street like a diver from the springboard. Once she felt the hard stones beneath her feet she would let herself drift in the warm tide of humanity ; and then walk as quickly as was seemly for a lady who did not wish to make herself conspicuous. To-day she kept her eyes lowered, lest they meet again that terrible look. . . . If she was being followed, she refused to be made aware of the fact. Yet she was haunted by the idea, and her heart nearly stood still every time someone jostled against her. Each sound was a martyrdom ; each footfall behind her was like a knell ; each shadow across the path a bad omen. She never felt safe unless in a friend's house, or driving in a taxi.

A gentleman raised his hat to her. On looking up she was relieved to find a friend of the family, an amiable, garrulous greybeard, whom as a rule she avoided because he entertained her interminably on the subject of a host of minor ailments from which he suffered. This afternoon Irene would have been glad of his company, but unfortunately she had allowed him to go on his way before realizing how useful a redoubt he would have been against another attack on the part of the black-mailer. Half turning to call her old acquaintance to her side, she became aware of a figure hastening towards her. Instinctively, without lingering to see who it might be, she dashed blindly forward again. But she knew now that

FEAR

she was being followed. Her shoulders cowered as she thought of the hand that would soon be laid upon them. The person was gaining on her. How escape? Her knees trembled, so that it was hard to keep going. Closer and closer drew the pursuer. Now a voice, soft yet determined, sounded in her ear. "Irene!" But this was not the voice she dreaded. She stopped and turned about so suddenly that Karl Brustmann nearly fell over her. His face was white with emotion, but as she gazed at him disconcertedly he blushed with mortification. He stretched forth his hand, and, since she did not shake it in greeting, he allowed the poor thing to drop to his side again. She had so little expected to meet him, that it was a good two seconds before she realized that she was staring him out of countenance. During all these days, since fear had become her constant companion, she had not given her lover a thought. Now, when confronted by his pale and questioning face, with its expression of vacant perplexity, her fury rose up like a torrent within her. At first her lips trembled too violently for her to utter a syllable, and the volcanic force of her excitement was writ so plainly upon her that the young man crumpled up.

"Irene, what's the matter?" he stammered. She made an impatient gesture, and he added humbly: "Have I done anything I shouldn't?"

She looked at him with an anger she was at no trouble to conceal.

"Done anything!" she cried mockingly. "Oh, no, you've not done anything—except nice, sweet, agreeable things."

Karl stood open-mouthed with amazement.

"But, Irene . . . Irene . . ."

"Better not make a scene in public," she said in a domineering tone. "I don't want any of your play-acting. Your exquisite friend is probably spying upon us

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

as usual, and when we separate she'll be after me again. . . ."

"Whom are you talking about?"

She would have liked to smack his silly, pasty face. Never had she hated anyone so fiercely as this snivelling little cur.

"But, Irene . . . Irene," he stuttered, feeling more and more dismayed. "What have I done? You suddenly made up your mind never to see me again . . . I've been waiting for you day and night. . . . All to-day I've been waiting outside your house in the hope of a few minutes' talk. . . ."

"You have been waiting? You too." Her anger made her unreasonable. If she could only give him a good slap in the face, what a relief such reckless violence would be. But she kept a grip on herself, merely looking her disgust, and meditating whether or not to tell him exactly what she thought of him. Early training won the day. She turned away abruptly; and, without looking round, was swallowed up in the press of people. Karl stood with outstretched hand, horrified, not knowing what next to do, until the current of humanity swept him along like a leaf that has fluttered down into the river and is carried unresistingly towards the sea.

Irene's hopes of being left in peace for a while were shattered when next day she received another peremptory demand for funds. Her fear was whipped up anew. This time it was for two hundred crowns—which she handed over without protest. These increased claims were horrible in the extreme for, though her private circumstances were ample enough, she knew very well that disbursements on such a scale could not pass unnoticed. To-morrow she might be asked to pay out four hundred crowns. The amount would increase by degrees to a thousand, and so on till she could pay no more. Then

FEAR

would come a series of anonymous letters; then—the inevitable disaster. What she was now buying was time, a breathing-space full of fear and strain. No longer could she read or even sew. At times she felt so ill that she had to sit down, for her head swam and an indefinable lassitude made her limp and listless. Yet for all this sense of fatigue, she was unable to sleep. Meanwhile she had to appear gay, to make her cheerfulness seem natural. Who can tell the amount of heroic effort that was put into the endeavour to behave as usual?

One only, among all the individuals who surrounded her, seemed to grasp the tragedy of what was going on in Irene's soul—and he knew, because he kept perpetually on the watch. The consciousness, the absolute conviction of this watchfulness, made her redouble her precautions, and she kept a wary eye on her husband's movements. By day and by night they spied upon one another, unremittingly, remorselessly. Fritz had changed considerably since the struggle began. His inquisitorial behaviour of the beginning had given place to the gentleness and consideration of the early years of their marriage. He treated her as though she were an invalid, profiting by every opportunity to encourage her to open her heart to him. Irene was acutely aware of her husband's kindness; and, for very shame, she became increasingly reluctant to confide her troubles to his tender mercy.

On one occasion Fritz spoke to her unambiguously. Irene had been for a walk, and on returning home had heard loud voices issuing from the nursery, her husband's strong and energetic, the governess's, shrilly reprobatory, to an accompaniment of childish snivelling and sobbing. Instantly, she was alarmed. After a first horrified convulsion, lest a letter might have been delivered during her absence, Irene pulled herself together and went upstairs. The commotion was no more than a child's squabble over a rocking-horse Aunt Suzie had brought a

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

few days ago. It had been given to Rudi, and Helen felt aggrieved that so fine a gift had fallen to her brother. Since he would not even share it with her, she had revenged herself by breaking it and had hidden the pieces in a cupboard. On being accused, she stoutly maintained her innocence, and as a last resort the governess had called in Father to act as judge. A proper trial was being held when Irene entered the room. The child denied having had anything to do with the crime, the governess acted as witness, Rudi as plaintiff. At length Helen could hold her own no longer, and broke down in a tumult of sobs and tears.

Irene had eyes only for her husband. It seemed to her that he was not sitting in judgment upon the child but upon herself. Might she not as early as to-morrow have to stand before him, the guilty party, trembling like her baby daughter and with the self-same catch in her voice? So long as Helen stuck to her lie, Father had frowned and spoken severely; but no sooner did she begin to acknowledge her wrong-doing than his manner softened. He argued the matter out with her gently, showed the child how unkind it had been to spoil her brother's pretty plaything. As Helen began to understand how naughty she had been, she broke into fresh tears, and howled out the truth.

Irene rushed to her little daughter's side, but the child pushed her mother away. Fritz, too, reproached her for such premature sympathy, for he was not inclined to let the culprit off without punishment. The two children had been invited to a party on the morrow and they had been looking forward to the treat for weeks. Well, Helen would have to stay at home. This was a blow, indeed; and when she had heard her sentence she set up a despairing wail. Rudi jumped round the room in triumph, which was short-lived, for his father said that gloating over another's unhappiness was an ungentle-

FEAR

manly thing to do, and to teach the lad better manners Herr Wagner told his son that neither he nor his sister would go to the party. It was a very crestfallen pair that finally withdrew, comforted only by the thought of their common misery.

Husband and wife were alone, and it was borne in upon Irene that now, if ever, she could confide her troubles, taking her daughter's misconduct as an excuse for opening the discussion. She would put in a plea for the little girl, and if he took the suggestion kindly she would know whether to venture upon an explanation of her own troubles.

"I say, Fritz, are you serious about not allowing the poor darlings to go to-morrow? They'll both be awfully cut up, especially Helen. She did not do anything so terrible after all. Why are you set on punishing her? Don't you think you are being a trifle over-severe? Aren't you sorry for her?"

He looked at her steadily.

"Sorry for her? Yes, I was; but now she no longer needs sympathy. Her heart is lighter for the punishment, though of course she's grieved to miss the party. Yesterday she was to be pitied because all the time we were hunting for the broken scraps of rocking-horse and were wondering who could be the culprit she was aching with suspense, knowing that sooner or later all would be discovered. Fear is much worse to bear than punishment, because the latter is something tangible. There is nothing more trying than to be in a state of tension. The sentence I pronounced on my girlie snapped the strain, and she immediately felt relieved. Don't be misled by the child's tears. They've been there all the time, repressed within; now she can cry to her heart's content; there's nothing to hide. Tears hurt horribly so long as they are pent up. . . ."

Was he speaking about his wife or his daughter? Irene

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

glanced up speculatively; but he did not seem to notice, continuing:

“Take my word for it, things work out like that. So much at least I have learned from being a man of law who has taken part in numberless trials. The prisoner under examination is always wretched so long as there is anything to hide; fear of discovery, the appalling need to keep up the lie, are sufficient to undermine the courage of the hardiest offender. I have seen men squirm as if they were having a tooth out when question after question came nearer to extracting the inevitable acknowledgment. Sometimes the word sticks in the throat, it is about to be pronounced. Then an inner devil, part defiance and part fear, drags it back again. The struggle begins anew. A judge frequently suffers more than the victim while the fight lasts. Yet the offender looks upon him as the enemy, he who in reality is trying his best to help. As for myself, since I am usually working in their defence, I ought to encourage them to stick to their lies through thick and thin. Well, I cannot invariably do my duty in this way, for I know that their agony will cease only when sentence has been pronounced and they have no more to hide. I have never been able to understand how people can enter upon a course of action which they know to be dangerous, and then lack courage to admit their fault. That a mere word, a word acknowledging one's guilt, should cause such senseless fear, appears to me more pitiable than the initial crime.”

“Is it your opinion, Fritz, that fear is the main cause of concealment? Might not shame play a part? Shame at having to explain, at having, so to speak, to undress beneath the public gaze. . . .”

He looked up perplexed and astonished. She had not been wont to take an active share in their discussions. The word she had chosen fascinated him.

“Shame? Shame is only another form of fear. I admit

FEAR

it is a higher and better form, that it is not due to anxiety on account of punishment but, rather . . . Yes, yes, I understand . . .”

He had got up, and was striding about the room in unusual excitement. Something had touched him on the raw. Suddenly he stopped in front of her, and spoke less sententiously, for he was profoundly moved.

“Agreed! Shame may have a role to play when one has to make an admission before strangers, before the masses who lap up scandal from the sensational press as a cat laps up milk. But I can’t see the need for feeling ashamed to acknowledge a fault to a person one is fond of.”

“And suppose,” Irene had to turn her head aside for she could not bear the gleam of his eyes, and she was aware that her voice trembled, “suppose . . . the feeling of shame is greater precisely in relation to the person one loves?”

He stood motionless, as if under a spell.

“You mean . . . you mean then”—and as he stammered the words his tone became caressing and low-pitched—“you mean . . . that Helen would have found it easier to admit her naughty prank to, let us say, Fraulein Marie, than . . . ?”

“I’m sure of it. She was headstrong and recalcitrant because your opinion is of more importance to her than anyone else’s, because . . . she loves you better than anyone else, because . . .”

Irene faltered, and again her husband stopped in his march to and fro and confronted her.

“Maybe you’re right . . . I’m sure you are right . . . Strange that I should never have thought of such an explanation. But you are right, and I would not have you believe I am incapable of forgiveness. No, I could not bear for you, Irene, to imagine I cannot be lenient on occasion. . . .”

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

She reddened under his gaze. Was it by chance that he spoke thus, or did he intend . . . did he mean to imply . . . ? Irene stood irresolute.

"The sentence is quashed," said he gaily. "Helen is free, and I'm going this minute to tell her the glad tidings. Does that please you, dear? Or have you some other wish? Better make the most of my generous mood . . . I'm happy to have been saved from perpetrating an injustice. One feels so relieved, Irene, always so relieved when . . ."

She fancied she could guess what he was hinting at, and, unconsciously, stepped up closer to him. The releasing word trembled on her lips. He, too, came nearer as if he would himself lift the burden that was crushing her. She met his eyes, in which she read a great longing that she should own up—and her resolution collapsed. Her hands dropped listlessly to her sides, and she turned away. "Impossible," she thought, "I can't do it, I shall never be able to confess, my lips refuse to speak the words that would bring peace to my soul." In her heart of hearts all she wished was for a speedy disclosure of the whole tormenting business.

And her wish seemed likely to be granted even sooner than she could have hoped. The mischief had been going on for a fortnight, and Irene felt that she was at the end of her tether. Four days had elapsed since she had heard anything of the creature, and fear was now so bone of her bone that every ring of the door-bell made her start. She kept perpetually on the alert for a missive from the black-mailer. Her impatience grew to become a yearning, for with every payment she knew that she had bought peace for at least one evening, peace to romp with her children, peace to go for a stroll.

Again the bell sounded through the house, and Irene flew downstairs to answer the door herself. A stranger

FEAR

stood before her, a lady in fashionable furs and a smart hat. . . . No, not a stranger, for under the brim Irene recognized the hated visage. . . .

"Glad to see you, Frau Wagner, for I have something important to talk to you about," and without waiting to be asked, the woman pushed past into the hall and slid her red parasol into the stand.

She behaved as though the place were her own, absolutely sure of herself, and evidently delighted at having intruded into so stately a mansion. Once more, without being asked, she made her way to a little reception-room on the right, whose door stood ajar.

"In here? Yes?" she asked mockingly.

Irene, still speechless with fear, would have hindered this uninvited guest from advancing farther, but the woman, with a wave of the hand, said cajolingly:

"There, there; we'll soon have done our little business. If you find it unpleasant we'll speed it up."

Frau Wagner, without another word followed the person into the room and shut the door. "Brazen-faced hussy," thought Irene, "to dare to push herself into my house. Never occurred to me she'd be so bold." She seemed to be living through a nightmare.

"Very pretty, I'm sure," said the intruder gazing round her as she took a seat. "Lovely and comfy this easy-chair. And, my! what a lot of pictures. Now I realize how miserably furnished we are. Oh, yes, Frau Wagner, it's all wonderfully pretty and cosy."

The impertinence of the woman, the way she made herself at home in another's house, she, a common criminal, broke down Irene's controls. Her long-dammed-up fury burst in a flood.

"You're nothing but a blackmailer," she cried. "What do you want? How dare you force your way into my house? But I'm not going to allow you to torture me any longer. I've made up my mind to . . ."

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

"Not so loud, please, your servants might overhear. Of course it's nothing to me. I'm not denying that what you say is true, and if I go to jail, oh, well, it can't be much worse than the life I am leading now. But Frau Wagner needs to be more cautious. Better be quite sure the door is shut if you mean to make a scene. Only let me tell you this—accuse me and berate me as much as you please, it won't make the slightest impression on me."

Anger had given Irene a momentary spurt of energy, but now her courage oozed away in face of the woman's imperturbability. Like a child waiting to be told what its next lesson is to be, she stood in her own reception-room, submissive and expectant.

"Very well, Frau Wagner, I'd better go straight to the point. As you know, things are not going so mighty strong with me just at present. I'm long overdue with the rent, and the landlord's starting to make a fuss. There are other debts hanging over my head. It's time I got a move on, and put my affairs in order. So here I am, come to you for help. I want four hundred crowns."

"I simply cannot manage such a sum. The truth is that I have not so much left. You've already had three hundred from me from my monthly allowance. Where do you expect me to get the money from?"

"You'll find a way, never fear. A wealthy lady like you can always get money when she needs it. But she's got to make up her mind she's jolly well going to get it. Give the matter a little thought, Frau Wagner. You'll find ways and means . . ."

"But I tell you I have no such sum left. I'd give it to you if I had it. Believe me, I have not got that much. The most I can manage at the moment is a hundred . . ."

"I've already explained that I need four hundred to put things straight," answered the woman, ignoring Irene's offer as beneath notice.

FEAR

"I have not got it," cried Irene in despair, fearing lest at any moment her husband might return and catch the woman under his roof. "I give you my word, I have not got such a sum. . . ."

"Best make haste and find it."

"I cannot."

The person looked Irene up and down as though setting a price on her.

"What about that ring? Only got to pawn it, and you'll have more than enough. Of course, I'm not in the know about such things and what they're worth, never having had any jewellery of my own. But I'm pretty sure they'd let you have four hundred crowns for it."

"My ring," exclaimed Irene, horrified by the suggestion, for it was her engagement ring, the only one of all her rings she never put away. The stone was one of the purest water, and was exquisitely set.

"Why not? I'll give you the pawn-ticket, and you can redeem it when you please. You'll get it back. I shan't keep it, you may be sure. What would a poor creature like me do with so costly a trinket?"

"Why are you persecuting me? Why are you tormenting me? Oh, I cannot stand it any more. Try to grasp that fact. I'm through. Can't you show a little mercy?"

"No one never had any mercy on me. They just let me rot with hunger. Why should I be moved to pity so rich a lady as yourself?"

Irene was about to answer, when she heard a latch-key pushed into the front door. Her husband, back from the office! Hardly knowing what she did, Irene wrenched the ring from her finger, and handed it over.

"Don't be frightened, I'm off," said the woman, made keenly aware by the look of fear in Irene's eyes, and the strained expression of her whole physiognomy, that the heavy tread in the hall was doubtless that of her victim's husband.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

She opened the door, bowed her head deferentially to the master of the house who glanced at her so casually that she might never have existed, and disappeared into the street.

No sooner had the door closed upon her retreating figure than, with a final lash to her flagging energies, Irene lamely informed her husband that "the lady came to make inquiries about something." The danger was over for the moment. Herr Wagner seemed hardly to notice his wife's words; he went quietly into the dining-room, and sat down to luncheon.

Where the ring had been on her finger, Irene felt there was now a circlet of flame, and that everybody would notice the absence of her beautiful gem. No matter where she tried to conceal her hand, she knew that Fritz's eyes were upon it. With faculties whetted to avert discovery, she set conversation flowing, she asked him question after question, joked with the children—to find in the end that she was breathless with excitement, that the talk petered out, that a distressful silence brooded over the little company. Another effort, a fresh endeavour to bring cheerfulness to the family board! She teased the two youngsters—but they refused to laugh; she tried to make them quarrel—but they remained on the best of terms. Evidently her gaiety must be producing a false note, must be sounding forced, otherwise how explain such antagonism? The more she was determined to make them laugh, the more coldly were her sallies received. In the end she became silent from very weariness.

Her table companions were silent likewise. The only noise to disturb the perfect quiet was the rattle of knives and forks on plates.

"Where's your ring?" asked Herr Wagner suddenly.

The inevitable question had come. One last effort must be made, one last lie be told. "Well, here goes," said Irene to herself, while aloud she answered:

FEAR

"I've taken it to be cleaned and overhauled." The lie encouraged her to add : "It will be ready in a day or two, when I am to fetch it."

Thus she was committed to producing the ring the day after to-morrow at latest. Some means would have to be found to redeem the pledge. A sense of relief, both mental and physical, pervaded her. She felt almost happy, for now she knew precisely the term of her incertitude. The decisive hour was at hand. Spiritual strength grew up within her—the strength to continue living, or the strength to die.

Knowledge of the near approach of this decisive hour in her destiny brought with it an unexpected clarity of vision. The nervous excitability which had so distraught her was replaced by orderly deliberation ; her fear, by an unwonted quietude of mind ; and this inner power and tranquillity enabled her to contemplate her life with the eye of a seer and to balance up its intrinsic worth. She weighed her existence, and found that it could even now become of value if, in the light of what she had recently gone through, she could raise it to fresh and higher planes, if she could give it new foundations, stable and strong, and based upon truth. To continue to live as a divorced woman, as an adulteress, besmirched by scandal—no, of that she did not feel capable, she was too tired. Too tired, likewise, was she to keep up the perilous jugglery of recent weeks. No longer had she the strength to endure. Husband, children, governess, domestics—all were suspicious and uneasy ; she herself was suspect to herself. Flight was out of the question ; for, no matter where she hid, her persecutor would track her down. The sole thing that might have helped her, confession of her fault, was now impossible. One road only lay open to her, but along that road no traveller returns.

On the following day, Irene burned every incrimina-

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

tory letter, put minor things in order, and avoided seeing the children—or anything for which she had a tender affection. She needed to keep all that was sweet and attractive in life at a distance so that she might not be lured from her purpose. Having set things to rights, she went out and walked the streets, hoping to run up against her tormentress. She wandered about with no positive end in view and with no sense of exaltation. Her spirit was weary; the fight had gone out of her. For two hours she walked, more from a sense of duty than from pleasure or necessity. The person she had hoped to meet was nowhere to be seen. But Irene was past suffering; she remained wholly indifferent to this disappointment. She wellnigh hoped now that the woman would not be abroad to accost her. The faces she looked at seemed dead, far away, for ever lost, and did not concern her.

Panic seized her for a moment when she imagined she caught her husband's eye across the street. But the form she dreaded was at that instant hidden behind a delivery van, and she comforted herself with the thought that it could not have been Fritz, seeing that he was invariably busied in the law-court at this hour. She lost all sense of time during her interminable peregrination, and came in late for luncheon. Her husband, too, was late. He returned a few minutes after and seemed perturbed.

Counting the hours till nightfall, Irene was alarmed to find how many there were before her. To her surprise, she found that it needed only a very few minutes to bid farewell, and that things lost all their value once a person had realized that they could not be taken on the everlasting journey. A feeling of sleepiness overtook her. Mechanically, she set out, walking, walking, without a thought in her head, blind to her surroundings. While crossing a street, she was within an inch of being run over; but, though the driver swore vehemently, Irene

FEAR

passed on, unruffled by the narrowly missed disaster. That would have been an easy way out, necessitating no effort on her part. It was restful not to have to think any more, but merely to float along like a cork, barely conscious of the approaching end.

Irene glanced up to see whereabouts she was, and was horrified to find that, in her aimless wanderings, she had come quite near to the house where her lover dwelt. Could it be a sign? Perhaps he would help her. At least he would know the address of the blackmailer. Relief made her tremble with joyful anticipation. Why had she not thought of this earlier? Her body instantly responded to her mood; her limbs became less leaden, hope flooded her gloom, clarity permeated her thoughts. She would insist upon his accompanying her to that creature's rooms, and then she could make an end of everything once and for all. Karl would demand that the woman cease blackmailing; maybe a substantial sum would suffice to induce her to leave the town. . . . Irene felt remorseful for having treated the young man so harshly. . . . But he would help her; she had no doubt of that. Strange that so easy a way out should have occurred to her only now, at the last minute. . . . Here was salvation.

She hurried up the stairs, and pressed the button of the electric bell. No one came to open it. And yet she was aware of tip-toeing down the passage. Again she sounded the bell. Again dead silence—save for that same faint rustle behind doors. . . . Her patience gave out. This was a matter of life and death. She kept her finger on the knob, and the bell rang and rang and rang. . . .

At length the door-latch slid back and a small crack opened. She whispered eagerly:

“It’s me. It’s only me.”

Karl opened the door wide.

“You . . . you, Frau Wagner? I was . . . I hardly . . . I had not expected a visit from you . . . Please excuse my

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

rig," he added, awkwardly enough, for he was in his shirtsleeves and had discarded collar and tie.

"I must have a word with you at once. It's vital. You'll have to help me," she said breathlessly. "Oh, please let me come in. I shan't keep you more than a minute."

"But . . . but . . . I'm busy . . . I can't exactly . . ."

"Nonsense. You simply must give me a hearing. After all, it's your fault. It's your duty to help me. You must; you have to get me back my ring. Or, at least you can give me the address . . . She follows me about wherever I go . . . and now when I want her, I cannot find her. You've got to—do you hear—you've got to help me . . ."

He stared at her, speechless with amazement.

"Ah, I see," continued Irene, "you pretend not to know whom I mean. Well, it's the lady-love you had before I came on the scene. She caught me as I was coming away, and ever since that day she has been torturing me, blackmailing me—so that now I am determined to put an end to everything. I'm sick of life. But I must have my ring back . . . at latest this evening. . . . Please help me. Give me her address. . . ."

"But . . ."

"Are you going to do what I ask, or are you not?"

"But I honestly do not know to whom you refer. I've never had any dealings with a blackmailer. . . ."

"You don't know her? She just invented the whole thing, did she? Yet she knows my name and address. Perhaps I am mistaken, too, in thinking she is a blackmailer? All a dream, eh?"

She laughed fiercely. Karl felt wretched. Irene's eyes were so bright, that for a moment he feared for her reason. He looked at her anxiously.

"Try to be calm, Frau Wagner. I am sure that you are making a mistake. It is difficult to understand why . . . No, really, I do not know any such woman. . . . Since

FEAR

I've been here—and you know it's not long—I have had only two... Please believe me... There's a mistake..."

"Am I to take it that you refuse to help me?"

"No, no! I'll give you any help I can."

"Very well, then. We shall go to her place..."

"To whose 'place'?" he asked, and again he feared that he had to do with a lunatic.

"To her place. Are you coming or are you not?"

"Certainly, certainly. Anything to please you..."

"So that's that. You realize, I suppose, that it's a question of life and death so far as I myself am concerned?"

Karl was hard put to it not to laugh. Then, very courteously, he said:

"I am extremely sorry, Frau Wagner, but for the time being I am otherwise engaged.... A music lesson... It is difficult to..."

"That puts the finishing touch! You give your piano lesson in your shirt-sleeves? Ugh, you're a liar...."

Irene was suddenly seized with an inspiration. She pushed by him, and entered his flat.

"I guess she's here all the time, and you are both playing the same game. You are probably sharing the proceeds—a blackmailer by proxy. But I'm determined to get to the bottom of this. I am no longer frightened..."

Karl tried to hold her back, but Irene slipped from his grasp and made for his bedroom.

A figure withdrew hastily at her approach. Evidently an eavesdropper! Irene looked at the woman whose dress was in disorder—but this was not the woman she sought.

"Sorry," she said, withdrawing as quickly as possible. "Awfully sorry... I'll explain everything—to-morrow. As a matter of fact—I don't understand—it's beyond me..."

She spoke to Karl as though he were a stranger. No

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

one could have guessed from her manner that at one time these two had been lovers. Her brain was in a whirl. Someone must be lying. But she was too exhausted, too tired to think, too tired even to look round. She closed her eyes and descended the stairs, feeling like a condemned criminal.

The street was dark. Was the person waiting over the way? Might not salvation be lurking just round the corner? Ought she not to fold her hands in prayer to a neglected god? If only things could be postponed for a month or two . . . Then she would be far away, in the country. The blackmailer would leave her in peace there among the meadows, the vineyards . . . Irene cast a furtive look up and down the street. Someone seemed to be lurking in a doorway over the road. . . . But the figure disappeared as she approached. For a moment she thought she recognized her husband. How awful if she were to meet him now, in her present plight. . . . She stopped, and peered into the recess. The figure was swallowed up in the shadows. Irene walked on with a queer feeling in her back. All the while she felt that someone was pursuing her, yet when she turned, there was not a soul to be seen.

A drug-store. Irene went in, and handed a prescription over the counter. She became acutely aware of the weighing machine, the labels, the bottles full of medicaments with their Latin names inscribed on each. The clock hanging from the wall ticked persistently, the whole place reeked of the sickly scent of pharmaceutical products. She remembered how as a child she had begged her mother to allow her to go and fetch any medicine that had been prescribed, because she loved the strange perfume of the apothecary's shop and the lovely coloured globes in the windows. This memory reminded her that she had not bid her mother farewell—a

FEAR

most disturbing thought, for the old lady would be terribly distressed by what was about to happen. However, the dispenser was pouring the liquid into a blue bottle . . . death, in a little phial . . . the deadly liquid flowing through the veins . . . Irene felt cold all over. She gazed, fascinated, at the man's fingers pushing in the cork, then pasting on the coloured label indicating that the bottle held poison, then the neat wrapping stuck down at the ends with red sealing wax. Her limbs were paralysed at the gruesome thought of . . .

"Two crowns, please," said the dispenser.

Irene started as if waking from a dream. She stared round her, sought the money in her bag, mechanically counted the coins.

Then someone jerked her arm, and she heard the sound of money thrown on the counter. A hand was thrust forward to seize the bottle.

She turned, and stared the intruder in the face. Her husband stood before her with tightly pressed lips. His cheeks were livid, and beads of perspiration glistened upon his forehead.

A feeling of faintness made her sway, and she leaned against the counter to steady herself. Suddenly it occurred to her that his had been the shadowy form in the doorway. He had been following her.

"Come," he said curtly.

She was amazed to find how docile she was, obeying without demur. Hardly realizing what she was about, she automatically dropped into his stride. Neither looked at the other. He still held the bottle in his hand. Once he stopped to wipe the sweat from his brow. She stopped likewise, not knowing that she did so. Still she did not venture to look up at him. They did not speak, the noise of the street ebbing and flowing around them.

He stepped aside so that she might pass into the house before him. But she missed his protection at once, and

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

began to totter. He slipped an arm about her. At the contact, she shrank and hastily made her way indoors. She reached her room; he followed. The walls and furnishings were barely discernible in the darkness. No word had as yet passed their lips. Fritz tore the wrapping from the bottle, and poured the contents away. Then he threw the empty bottle into a corner. Irene shivered at the noise caused by breaking glass.

And still they kept silence. At length he stepped up to her, close, and closer, so that she was intensely aware of his heavy breathing. She waited patiently for the storm to burst, and she quailed under the fierce grip of his hand on her arm. But even now he kept silent, and abruptly she recognized that, far from being the hard task-master she dreaded, he was gentle and kind.

“Irene, how much longer are we going to torture one another?”

The pent-up unhappiness of recent weeks broke forth in convulsive sobs; she was shaken so powerfully that she tottered and would have fallen had he not supported her.

“Irene, Irene,” he said comfortingly.

He repeated her name over and over again, each time in a gentler and more endearing tone, as if to calm her spiritual turmoil by an excess of tenderness. For all answer, Irene sobbed and sobbed, a prey to wave after wave of agony. Fritz carried her to the divan, and tucked her up cosily amid cushions and under a warm rug. But the sobbing did not cease. Her body was quivering, and a cold shiver ran up and down her.

He held her hands in his, kissed her throat, her gown. The tears streamed down her cheeks, her temples beat furiously. Fritz was becoming anxious. Kneeling beside the couch, he brought his face close to hers and whispered:

“Irene, my darling, why are you crying now? Every-

FEAR

thing is finished and done with. Don't worry any more. She'll never come again. . . ."

Her body was convulsed anew, and he held her in a tight embrace. Such despair made him uneasy. He felt almost as though he were a murderer. Again he kissed her, and yet again, murmuring incoherently:

"No, dear, never again. She'll never come again, I promise. How could I guess you'd be so frightened? I only meant to remind you of your duty as wife and mother, only wanted to call you home, away from him, back to us who love you. What choice had I, when the affair came to my ears? I could not speak to you personally about such a thing. I always thought you'd come back to us of your own accord. And since you did not, I engaged the poor mortal to force matters by giving you a fright. She's an unhappy wretch, a decayed actress, and it was hard to persuade her to do what I required of her. I see now that I was wrong to force your hand. But, Irene, my dear, I did so want to get you back to us. And all the time I have thrown out hint after hint—and very obvious ones—that I was ready and eager to overlook everything. Only, you failed to understand. Believe me, I had no intention to drive you to such extremities. I, too, have suffered agonies, watching you, step by step. . . . It is for the children's sake, perhaps more than anything, that I wanted you back. Now all is over. Now all will be well."

His voice floated towards her as if from an infinite distance, and she hardly took in what he said. Her mind was in a tumult; she was past feeling. And yet she was dimly aware of kisses and endearments, and of tears wetting her cheeks. From within came a sensation of clamouring bells. Then she knew no more. As she came to, she was conscious of someone undressing her. She opened her eyes, and saw her husband leaning over her with an anxious and kindly expression. Then, again,

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

darkness enfolded her, but this time it was the healing unconsciousness of sleep.

She did not awake until it was broad day. A sense of light came from within her likewise, a feeling of serenity, as of fine weather after storm. She tried to remember what had happened, but her mind was befogged. As in a dream, she floated weightless through space, and in order to come down on to earth she felt herself all over.

What was this? The ring was on her finger. . . . Immediately she was fully awake. Half-understood words abruptly became clear, became real, acquired a sequence. The whole business was elucidated as in a flash: her husband's questionings, her lover's amazement. Clouds rolled aside, and she saw the net in which she had allowed herself to be caught. Bitterness and shame overwhelmed her; she trembled; she was sorry to be awake again. How restful had been that dreamless, carefree sleep.

Children's voices came from the nursery. The youngsters were getting up amid frolic and laughter, like birds greeting the dawn. That was Rudi's voice. She had never noticed before that it resembled his father's. Her lips parted in a smile. She closed her eyes, the better to enjoy everything that made her life worth living and filled her days with happiness. A little pain still lurked in her heart. But that was no more than the smart of a wound in the process of healing. Soon, she knew, it would be healed for ever.

THE FOWLER SNARED



LAST summer I spent a month at Cadenabbia—one of those little places on Lake Como, where white villas are so prettily bowered amid dark trees. The town is quiet enough even during the spring season, when the narrow strand is thronged with visitors from Bellaggio and Menaggio; but in these hot weeks of August it was an aromatic and sunny solitude. The hotel was almost empty. The few stragglers that remained looked at one another quizzically each morning, surprised to see anyone else staying on in so forsaken a spot. For my part, I was especially astonished by the persistence of an elderly gentleman, carefully dressed and of cultivated demeanour, who might have been a cross between an English statesman and a Parisian man-about-town. Why, I wondered, did he not go away to some seaside resort? He spent his days meditatively watching the smoke that rose from his cigarette, and occasionally fluttering the pages of a book. There came a couple of rainy days, and in these we struck up acquaintance. He made such cordial advances that the difference between our ages was soon bridged over, and we became quite intimate. Born in Livonia, educated in France and England, he had never had either a fixed occupation or a fixed place of abode. A homeless wanderer, he was, as it were, a pirate or viking—a rover who took his toll of beauty from every place where he chanced to set his foot. An amateur of all the arts, he disdained to practise any. They had given him a thousand happy hours, and he

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

had never given them a moment's creative fire. His life was one of those that seem utterly superfluous, for with his last breath the accumulated store of his experiences would be scattered without finding an heir.

I hinted as much one evening, when we sat in front of the hotel after dinner, watching the darkness steal across the lake.

"Perhaps you are right," he said with a smile. "I have no interest in memories. Experience is experienced once for all; then it is over and done with. The fancies of fiction, too—do they not fade after a time, do they not perish in twenty, fifty, or a hundred years? But I will tell you an incident which might be worked up into a good story. Let us take a stroll. I can talk better when I am on the move."

We walked along the lovely road bordering the lake, beneath the cypresses and chestnut trees. The water, ruffled by the night breeze, gleamed through the foliage.

"Let me begin with a confession. I was in Cadenabbia last year, in August, and staying at the same hotel. No doubt that will surprise you, for I remember having told you that I make a point of avoiding these repetitions. But you will understand why I have broken my rule as soon as you have heard my story.

"Of course the place was just as deserted as it is now. The man from Milan was here, that fellow who spends the whole day fishing, to throw his catch back into the lake when evening comes, in order to angle for the same fish next morning. There were two Englishmen, whose existence was so tranquil, so vegetative, that one hardly knew they were there. Besides these, there was a handsome stripling, and with him a charming though rather pale girl. I have my doubts whether she was his wife—they seemed much too fond of one another for that.

"Last of all, there was a German family, typical North Germans. A lean, elderly woman, a faded blonde, all

THE FOWLER SNARED

elbows and gawkiness; she had piercing blue eyes, and her peevish mouth looked like a slit cut by a knife. The other woman was unmistakably her sister, for she had the same traits, though somewhat softened. The two were always together, silently bent over their needlework, into which they seemed to be stitching all the vacancy of their minds—the pitiless Grey Sisters of a world of tedium and restraints. With them was a girl, sixteen or seventeen years old, the daughter of one or the other. In her, the harshness of the family features was softened, for the delicate contours of budding womanhood were beginning to show themselves. All the same she was distinctly plain, being too lean and still immature. Moreover, she was unbecomingly dressed, and yet there was something wistful about her appearance.

"Her eyes were large, and full of subdued fire; but she was so bashful that she could not look anyone in the face. Like the mother and the aunt, she always had some needlework with her, though she was not as industrious as they; from time to time the movements of her hands would grow sluggish, her fingers would doze, and she would sit motionless, gazing dreamily across the lake. I don't know what it was that I found so attractive in her aspect on these occasions. Was it no more than the commonplace but inevitable impression aroused by the sight of a withered mother beside a daughter in the fresh bloom of youth, the shadow behind the substance; the thought that in every cheek there lurks a fold; in every laugh, weariness; in every dream, disillusionment? Was it the ardent but aimless yearning that was so plainly manifest in her expression, the yearning of those wonderful hours in a girl's life when her eyes look covetously forth into the universe because she has not yet found the one thing to which in due time she will cling—to rot there as algae cling to and rot on a floating log? Whatever the cause, I found it pathetic to watch her, to note the

loving way in which she would caress a dog or a cat, and the restlessness with which she would begin one task after another only to abandon it. Touching, too, was the eagerness with which she would scan the shabby books in the hotel library, or turn the well-thumbed pages of a volume or two of verse she had brought with her, would muse over the poems of Goethe or Baumbach."

He broke off for a moment, to say:

"What are you laughing at?"

I apologized.

"You must admit that the juxtaposition of Goethe and Baumbach is rather quaint."

"Quaint? Perhaps it is. But it's not so funny after all. A girl at that age doesn't care whether the poetry she reads is good or bad, whether the verses ring true or false. The metrical lines are only the vessels in which there can be conveyed something to quench thirst; and the quality of the wine matters nothing, for she is already drunken before she puts her lips to the cup.

"That's how it was with this girl. She was brim-full of longing. It peeped forth from her eyes, made her fingers wander tremulously over the table, gave to her whole demeanour an awkward and yet attractive appearance of mingled timidity and impulsiveness. She was in a fever to talk, to give expression to the teeming life within her; but there was no one to talk to. She was quite alone as she sat there between those two chill and circumspect elders, whose needles were plied so busily on either side of her. I was full of compassion for her, but I could not make any advances. What interest has such a girl in a man of my age? Besides, I detest opening up acquaintance with a family circle, and have a particular dislike to these philistine women of a certain age.

"A strange fancy seized me. 'Here,' I thought to myself, 'is a girl fresh from school, unfledged and inexperienced, doubtless paying her first visit to Italy. All

Germans read Shakespeare, and thanks to Shakespeare (who never set foot in Italy!) this land will be to her the land of romance and love—of Romeos, secret adventures, fans dropped as signals, flashing daggers, masks, duennas, and billets-doux. Beyond question she must be dreaming of such things; and what limits are there to a girl's dreams, those streamlets of white cloud floating aimlessly in the blue, flashing red and gold when evening falls? Nothing will seem to her improbable or impossible.' I made up my mind to find her a lover.

"That evening I wrote a long letter, a tender epistle, yet full of humility and respect. It was in German, but I managed to impart an exotic flavour to the phrasing. There was no signature. The writer asked nothing and offered nothing. It was the sort of love-letter you will find in a novel—not too long—and characterized, if I may use the term, by a reserved extravagance. Knowing that, driven by the urge of her inner restlessness, she was always the first to enter the breakfast-room, I rolled this letter inside her table-napkin.

"Next morning, I took up a post of observation in the garden. Watching her through the window, I marked her incredulous surprise. She was more than surprised, she was startled; her pale cheeks were tinted with a sudden flush, which spread down the neck. She looked round in alarm; her hands twitched; furtively, she hid the missive. Throughout breakfast she was restless, and could hardly eat a morsel, for her one desire was to get away into an unfrequented alley where she could pore over the mysterious letter.—Did you speak?"

I had made an involuntary movement, and had to account for it.

"You were taking a big risk. Did you not foresee that she might make inquiries, might ask the waiter how the letter found its way into her table-napkin? Or that she might show it to her mother?"

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

"Of course I thought of such possibilities. But if you had seen the girl, had noted how she was scared if any-one spoke loudly, you would have had no anxiety at all. There are some young women who are so shamefaced that a man can take with them any liberties he pleases. They will endure the uttermost because they cannot bear to complain about such a thing.

"I was delighted to watch the success of my device. She came back from her walk in the garden, and my own temples throbbed at sight of her. She was a new girl, with a more sprightly gait. She did not know what to do with herself; her cheeks were burning once more, and she was adorably awkward in her embarrassment. So it went on throughout the day. She glanced at one window after another as if hoping to find there the clue to the enigma, and looked searchingly at every passer-by. Once her eyes met mine, and I averted my gaze, being careful not to betray myself by the flicker of an eyelid. But in that fugitive instant I became aware that a volcano of passionate inquiry was raging within her; I was, indeed, almost alarmed at the realization, for I remembered what I had learned long years before, that no pleasure is more seductive and more dangerous than that which comes to a man when he is the first to awaken such a spark in a girl's eyes.

"I watched her as she sat with idle fingers between the two stitching elders, and I saw how from time to time her hand moved towards a particular part of her dress where I was sure the letter lay hid. The fascination of the sport grew. That evening I wrote a second letter, and continued to write to her night after night. It became more and more engrossing to instil into these letters the sentiments of a young man in love, to depict the waxing of an imaginary passion. No doubt one who sets snares for game has similar sensations; the deer-stalker must enjoy them to the full. Almost terrified at my own success, I

THE FOWLER SNARED

was half in mind to discontinue the amusement; but the temptation to persevere in what had been so well begun was too much for me.

“By now she seemed to dance as she walked; her features showed a hectic beauty. All her nights must have been devoted to expectation of the morning letter, for there were black rings beneath her eyes. She began to pay more attention to her appearance, and wore flowers in her hair. She touched everything more tenderly, and looked ever more questioningly at the things upon which her glance lighted, for I had interwoven into the letters numerous indications that the writer was near at hand, was an Ariel who filled the air with music, watched all she did, but deliberately remained invisible. So marked was the increase of cheerfulness, that even the dull old women noticed it, for they watched her springing gait with kindly inquisitiveness, noted the bloom on her cheeks, and exchanged meaning smiles with one another. Her voice became richer, more resonant, more confident; often it seemed as if she were on the point of bursting out into triumphant song, as if—But you’re amused once more!”

“No, no, please go on with your story. I was only thinking how extraordinary well you tell it. You have a real talent, and no novelist could better this recital.”

“You seem to be hinting that I have the mannerisms of your German novelists, that I am lyrically diffuse, stilted, sentimental, tedious. I will try to be more concise. The marionette danced, and I pulled the strings skilfully. To avert suspicion from myself (for I sometimes felt her eyes rest on me dubiously), I had implied in the letters that the writer was not actually staying at Cadenabbia but at one of the neighbouring resorts, and that he came over here every day by boat. Thenceforward, whenever the bell rang to indicate the approach of the steamer, she would make some excuse for

eluding maternal supervision, and from a corner of the pier would breathlessly watch the arrivals.

“One day—the afternoon was overcast, and I had nothing better to do than to watch her—a strange thing happened. Among the passengers was a handsome young fellow, rather overdressed, after the Italian manner. As he surveyed the landing stage, he encountered the young girl’s glance of eager inquiry. A smile involuntarily played round her lips, and her cheeks flamed. The young man started; his attention was riveted. Naturally enough, in answer to so ardent a look, full of so much unexpressed meaning, he smiled, and moved towards her. She took to flight; stopped for a moment, in the conviction that this was the long-expected lover; hurried on again; and then glanced back over her shoulder. The old interplay between desire and dread, yearning and shame, in which tender weakness always proves the stronger! Obviously encouraged, in spite of his surprise, the young man hastened after her. He had almost caught up with her, and I was feeling in my alarm that the edifice I had been building was about to be shattered, when the two elderly women came down the path. Like a frightened bird, the girl flew to seek their protection. The young man discreetly withdrew, but he and the girl exchanged another ardent glance before he turned away. I had had a warning to finish the game, but still the lure overpowered me, and I decided to enlist chance in my service. That evening I wrote her a letter that was longer than ever, in terms that could not fail to confirm her suspicion. To have two puppets to play with made the amusement twice as great.

“Next morning I was alarmed to note signs of disorder. The charming restlessness had been replaced by an incomprehensible misery. Her eyes were tear-stained, and her silence was like the silence which preludes a fit of weeping. I had expected signs of joyous certainty, but

THE FOWLER SNARED

her whole aspect was one of despair. I grew sick at heart. For the first time an intrusive force was at work; my marionette would not dance when I pulled the string. I racked my brains vainly in the attempt to discover what was amiss. Vexed and anxious at the turn things had taken, and determined to avoid the unconscious accusation of her looks, I went out for the whole day. When I returned, the matter was cleared up. Their table was not laid; the family had left. She had had to go away without saying a word to her lover. She could not dare to tell her mother and her aunt all that another day, another hour, might mean to her. They had snatched her out of this sweet dream to some pitiful little provincial town. I had never thought of such an end to my amusement. There still rises before my eyes the accusation of that last look of hers, instinct with anger, torment, and hopelessness. I still think of all the suffering I brought into her young life, to cloud it perhaps for many years to come."

He had finished. But now it was quite dark, and the moon was shining fitfully through the clouds. We walked for some distance before my companion broke the silence.

"There is my story. Would it not be a good theme for a writer of fiction?"

"Perhaps. I shall certainly treasure it amid much more than you have told me. But one could hardly make a story of it, for it is merely a prelude. When people cross one another's paths like this without having their destinies intertwined, what more is there than a prelude? A story needs an ending."

"I see what you mean. You want to know what happened to the girl, her return home, the tragedy of her everyday life . . ."

"No, I was not thinking of that. I have no further interest in the girl. Young girls are never interesting,

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

however remarkable they may fancy themselves, for all their experiences are negative, and are therefore too much alike. The girl of your prelude will in due time marry some worthy citizen, and this affair will be to her nothing more than an ardent memory. I was not thinking of the girl."

"You surprise me. I don't know what can stir your interest in the young man. These glances, these sparks struck from flint, are such as everyone knows in his youth. Most of us hardly notice them at the time, and the rest forget them as soon as the spark is cold. Not until we grow old do we realize that these flashes are perhaps the noblest and deepest of all that happens to us, the most precious privilege of youth."

"I was not thinking of the young man either."

"What then?"

"I should like to tell the end of the older man's story, the letter writer. I doubt if any man, even though well on in years, can write ardent letters and feign love in such a way without paying for it. I should try to show how the sport grew to earnest, and how the man who thought he was playing a game found that he had become a pawn in his own game. Let us suppose that the growing beauty of the girl, which he imagines he is contemplating dispassionately, charms him and holds him in thrall. Just when everything slips out of his hands, he feels a wild longing for the game—and the toy. It would delight me to depict that change in the love impulse which must make an ageing man's passion very like that of an immature youth, because both are aware of their own inadequacy. He should suffer from love's uneasiness and from the weariness of hope deferred. I should make him vacillate, follow up the girl to see her once more, but at the last moment lack courage to present himself in her sight. He should come back to the place where he had begun his sport, hoping to find her

there again, wooing fortune's favour only to find fortune pitiless. That is the sort of end I should give the story, and it would be . . .”

“False, utterly false!”

I was startled. The voice at my ear was harsh and yet tremulous; it broke in upon my words like a threat. Never before had I seen my acquaintance moved by strong emotion. Instantly I realized that, in my thoughtless groping, I had laid my finger on a very sore spot. In his excitement he had come to a standstill, and when I turned to look at him the sight of his white hair was a distress to me.

I tried, rather lamely, to modify the significance of what I had said. But he turned this attempt aside. By now he had regained his composure, and he began to speak once more in a voice that was deep and tranquil, but tinged with sadness:

“Perhaps, after all, you are right. That would certainly be an interesting way of ending the story. ‘L'amour coûte cher aux vieillards.’ The phrase is Balzac's if I mistake not. I think it is the title of one of the most touching of his stories. Plenty more could be written under the same caption. But the old fellows, those who know most about it, would rather talk of their successes than of their failures. They think the failures will exhibit them in a ludicrous light, although these failures are but the inevitable swing of time's pendulum. Do you think it was merely by chance that the missing chapters of Casanova's *Memoirs* are those relating to the days when the adventurer was growing old, when the fowler was in danger of being caught in his own snare? Maybe his heart was too sore to write about it.”

My friend offered me his hand. The thrill had quite passed out of his voice.

“Good night,” he said. “I see it is dangerous to tell a young man tales on a summer evening. Foolish fancies,

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

needless dreams, are so readily aroused at such times. Good night!"

He walked away into the darkness with a step which, though still elastic, was nevertheless a little slackened by age. It was already late. But the fatigue I might have felt this sultry night was kept at bay by the stir of the blood that comes when something strange has happened, or when sympathetic understanding makes one for an instant relive another's experiences. I wandered along the quiet and lonely road as far as the Villa Carlotta, where the marble stairs lead down to the lake, and seated myself on the cool steps. The night was wonderfully beautiful. The lights of Bellaggio, which before had seemed close at hand, like fireflies flickering amid the leaves, now looked very far away across the water. The silent lake resembled a black jewel with sparkling edges. Like white hands, the rippling waves were playing up and down the lowest steps. The vault of heaven, radiant with stars, was infinite in its expanse. From time to time came a meteor, like one of these stars loosened from the firmament and plunging athwart the night sky; downwards into the dark, into the valleys, on to the hills, or into the distant water, driven by a blind force as our lives are driven into the abysses of unknown destinies.

THE GOVERNESS

THE two girls were alone in their room. The light had been extinguished, and all was dark except for a faint shimmer from the two beds. They were both breathing so quietly that they might have been supposed to be asleep.

"I say," came a gentle, hesitating whisper from one of the beds. The twelve-year-old girl was speaking.

"What is it?" asked her sister, who was a year older.

"I'm so glad you're still awake. I've something to tell you."

There was no answer in words, only a rustle from the other bed. The elder girl had sat up, and was waiting, her eyes asparkle in the dim light.

"Look here, this is what I want to tell you. But, first of all, have you noticed anything funny about Miss Mann lately?"

"Yes," said the other after a moment's silence. "There is something, but I hardly know what. She's not so strict as she used to be. For two days I haven't done my exercises, and she never scolded me about it. I don't know what's happened, but she doesn't seem to bother about us any more. She sits all by herself, and doesn't join in our games as she used to."

"I think she's unhappy, and tries not to show it. She never plays the piano now."

There was a pause, and then the elder girl spoke once more:

"You said you had something to tell me."

"Yes, but you must keep it to yourself. You mustn't breathe a word about it to Mother, or to your friend, Lottie."

"Of course I won't," answered the other indignantly. "Do get on!"

"Well, after we'd come up to bed, it suddenly struck me that I'd never said good night to Miss Mann. I didn't bother to put on my shoes again, and I tiptoed across to her room, meaning to give her a surprise. So I opened her door quietly, and for a moment I thought she wasn't there. The light was on, but I couldn't see her. Then suddenly—I was quite startled—I heard someone crying, and I saw that she was lying dressed on her bed, her head buried in the pillows. She was sobbing so dreadfully that it made me feel all queer, but she never noticed me. Then I crept out and shut the door as softly as I could. I stood outside there for a moment, for I could hardly walk, and through the door I could still hear her sobbing. Then I came back."

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Then the elder girl said with a sigh:

"Poor Miss Mann!" and there was another pause.

"I wonder what on earth she was crying about," resumed the younger girl. "She hasn't been in any row lately, for Mother hasn't been nagging at her as she always used to, and I'm sure we've not been troublesome. What can there be to make her cry?"

"I think I can guess," said the elder.

"Well, out with it!"

The answer was delayed, but at length it came:

"I believe she's in love."

"In love?" The younger girl started up. "In love? Who with?"

"Haven't you noticed?"

"You can't mean Otto?"

"Of course I do! And he's in love with her. All the

THE GOVERNESS

three years he's been living with us he never came for a walk with us until two or three months ago. But now he doesn't miss a day. He hardly noticed either of us until Miss Mann came. Now he's always fussing round. Every time we go out, we seem to run across him, either in the Park or in the Gardens or somewhere—wherever Miss Mann takes us. Surely you've noticed?"

"Yes, of course I've noticed," answered the younger. "But I just thought . . ."

She did not finish her sentence.

"Oh, I didn't want to make too much of it either. But after a time I was sure that he was only using us as an excuse."

There was a long silence, while the girls were thinking things over. The younger was the first to resume the conversation.

"But if so, why should she cry? He's very fond of her. I've always thought it must be so jolly to be in love."

"So have I," said the elder dreamily. "I can't make it out."

Once more came the words, in a drowsy voice:
"Poor Miss Mann!"

So their talk ended for that night.

They did not allude to the matter again in the morning, but each knew that the other's thoughts were full of it. Not that they looked meaningfully at one another, but in spite of themselves they would exchange glances when their eyes had rested on the governess. At meals they contemplated their cousin Otto aloofly, as if he had been a stranger. They did not speak to him, but scrutinized him furtively, trying to discover if he had a secret understanding with Miss Mann. They had no heart in their amusements, for they could think of nothing but this urgent enigma. In the evening, with an assumption of indifference, one of them asked the other:

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

"Did you notice anything more to-day?"

"No," said the sister, laconically.

They were really afraid to discuss the subject. Thus matters continued for several days. The two girls were silently taking notes, uneasy in mind and yet feeling that they were on the verge of discovering a wonderful secret.

At length, it was at supper, the younger girl noticed that the governess made an almost imperceptible sign to Otto, and that he nodded in answer. Trembling with excitement, she gave her sister a gentle kick under cover of the table. The elder looked inquiringly at the younger, who responded with a meaning glance. Both were on tenterhooks for the rest of the meal. After supper the governess said to the girls:

"Go to the schoolroom and find something to do. My head is aching, and I must lie down for half an hour."

The instant they were alone, the younger burst out with:

"You'll see, Otto will go into her room!"

"Of course," said the other, "that's why she sent us in here."

"We must listen outside the door."

"But suppose someone should come. . . ."

"Who?"

"Mother."

"That would be awful," exclaimed the younger in alarm.

"Look here, I'll listen, and you must keep cavy in the passage."

The little one pouted.

"But then you won't tell me everything."

"No fear!"

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright! You must cough if you hear anyone coming."

They waited in the passage, their hearts throbbing

THE GOVERNESS

with excitement. What was going to happen? They heard a footstep, and stole into the dark schoolroom. Yes, it was Otto. He went into Miss Mann's room and closed the door. The elder girl shot to her post, and listened at the keyhole, hardly daring to breathe. The younger looked enviously. Burning with curiosity, she too stole up to the door, but her sister pushed her away, and angrily signed to her to keep watch at the other end of the passage. Thus they waited for several minutes, which to the younger girl seemed an eternity. She was in a fever of impatience, and fidgeted as if she had been standing on hot coals. She could hardly restrain her tears because her sister was hearing everything. At length a noise startled her, and she coughed. Both the girls fled into the schoolroom, and a moment passed before they had breath enough to speak. Then the younger said eagerly:

“Now then, tell me all about it.”

The elder looked perplexed, and said, as if talking to herself:

“I don’t understand.”

“What?”

“It’s so extraordinary.”

“What? What?” said the other furiously.

The elder made an effort:

“It was extraordinary, quite different from what I expected. I think when he went into the room he must have wanted to put his arms round her or to kiss her, for she said: ‘Not now, I’ve something serious to tell you.’ I couldn’t see anything, for the key was in the way, but I could hear all right. ‘What’s up?’ asked Otto, in a tone I’ve never heard him use before. You know how he generally speaks, quite loud and cheekily, but now I am sure he was frightened. She must have noticed that he was humbugging, for all she said was: ‘I think you know well enough.’—‘Not a bit.’—‘If so,’ she said in ever so

sad a tone, 'why have you drawn away from me? For a week you've hardly spoken to me; you avoid me whenever you can; you are never with the girls now; you don't come to meet us in the Park. Have you ceased to care for me all of a sudden? Oh, you know only too well why you are drawing back like this.' There was no answer for a moment. Then he said: 'Surely you realize how near it is to my examination. I have no time for anything but my work. How can I help that?' She began to cry, and while sobbing, she said to him gently: 'Otto, do speak the truth. What have I done that you should treat me like this? I have not made any claim on you, but we must talk things out frankly. Your expression shows me plainly that you know all about . . . ?'

The girl began to shake, and could not finish her sentence. The listener pressed closer, and asked:

"All about what?"

"All about our baby!"

"Their baby!" the younger broke in. "A baby! Impossible!"

"That's what she said."

"You can't have heard right."

"But I did. I'm quite sure. And he repeated it: 'Our baby!' After a time she went on: 'What are we to do now?' Then . . . ?"

"Well?"

"Then you coughed, and I had to bolt for it."

The younger was frightfully perplexed.

"But she can't have a baby. Where can the baby be?"

"I don't understand any more than you."

"Perhaps she's got it at home. Of course, Mother would not let her bring it here. That must be why she is so unhappy."

"Oh, rot, she didn't know Otto then!"

They pondered helplessly. Again the younger girl said:

THE GOVERNESS

"A baby, it's impossible. How can she have a baby? She's not married, and only married people have children."

"Perhaps she is married."

"Don't be an idiot. She never married Otto, anyhow."

"Well, then?"

They stared at one another.

"Poor Miss Mann," said one of them sorrowfully.

They always seemed to come back to this phrase, which was like a sigh of compassion. But always their curiosity blazed up once more.

"Do you think it's a boy or a girl?"

"How on earth can I tell?"

"What if I were to ask her, tactfully?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Why shouldn't I? She's so awfully nice to us."

"What's the use. They never tell us that sort of thing. If they are talking about them when we come into the room they immediately dry up, and begin to talk rot to us as if we were still kids—though I'm thirteen. What's the use of asking her, just to be humbugged?"

"But I want to know."

"Well, of course, I should like to know too."

"What bothers me is that Otto pretended not to know anything about it. One must know when one has a baby, just as one knows one has a father and mother."

"Oh, he was only putting it on. He's always kidding!"

"But not about such a thing. It's only when he wants to pull our leg."

They were interrupted by the governess coming in at that moment, and they pretended to be hard at work. But it did not escape them that her eyelids were red, and that her voice betrayed deep emotion. They sat perfectly quiet, regarding her with a new respect. "She has

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

a baby," they kept on thinking; "that is why she is so sorrowful." But upon them, too, sorrow was stealing unawares.

At dinner next day, they learned a startling piece of news. Otto was going away. He had told his uncle that he had to work extra hard just before examination, and that there were too many interruptions in the house. He was going into lodgings for the next two months.

The girls were bubbling with excitement. They felt sure that their cousin's departure must be connected in some way with the previous day's conversation. Instinct convinced them that this was a coward's flight. When Otto came to say good-bye to them they were deliberately rude, and turned their backs on him. Nevertheless, they watched his farewell to Miss Mann. She shook hands with him calmly, but her lips twitched.

The girls were changed beings these days. They seldom laughed, could not take pleasure in anything, were sad-eyed. They prowled restlessly about, and distrusted their elders, suspecting that an intention to deceive was lurking behind the simplest utterance. Ever on the watch, they glided like shadows, and listened behind doors, eager to break through the net which shut them off from the mystery—or at least to catch through its meshes a glimpse into the world of reality. The faith, the contented blindness of childhood, had vanished. Besides, they were continually expecting some new revelation, and were afraid they might miss it. The atmosphere of deceit around them made them deceitful. Whenever their parents were near, they pretended to be busily engaged in childish occupations. Making common cause against the world of grown-ups, they were drawn more closely together. A caressive impulse would often make them embrace one another when overwhelmed by a sense of their ignorance and impotence;

THE GOVERNESS

and sometimes they would burst into tears. Without obvious cause, their lives had passed into a critical phase.

Among their manifold troubles, one seemed worse than all the rest. Tacitly, quite independently of one another, they had made up their minds that they would give as little trouble as they could to Miss Mann, now that she was so unhappy. They were extremely diligent, helping one another in their lessons; were always quiet and well behaved; tried to anticipate their teacher's wishes. But the governess never seemed to notice, and that was what hurt them more than anything. She was so different now. When one of the girls spoke to her, she would start as though from slumber, and her gaze seemed to come back to them as if it had been probing vast distances. For hours she would sit musing, and the girls would move on tiptoe lest they should disturb her, for they fancied she was thinking of her absent child. In their own awakening womanhood, they had become fonder than ever of the governess, who was now so gentle towards them. Miss Mann, who had been lively, and at times a trifle overbearing, was more thoughtful and considerate, and the girls felt that all her actions betrayed a secret sorrow. They never actually saw her weeping, but her eyelids were often red. It was plain she wanted to keep her troubles to herself, and they were deeply grieved not to be able to help her.

One day, when the governess had turned away towards the window to wipe her eyes, the younger girl plucked up courage to seize her hand and say:

“Miss Mann, you are so sad. It's not our fault, is it?”

The governess looked tenderly at the child, stroked her hair, and answered:

“No, dear. Of course it is not your fault.” She kissed the little maid's forehead.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

Thus the girls were continually on the watch, and one of them, coming unexpectedly into the sitting-room, caught a word or two that had not been intended for her ears. Her parents promptly changed the conversation, but the child had heard enough to set her thinking.

"Yes, I have been struck by the same thing," the mother had been saying. "I shall have to speak to her."

At first the little girl had fitted the cap on her own head, and had run to consult her sister.

"What do you think the row can be about?"

But at dinner-time they noticed how their father and mother were scrutinizing the governess, and how they then looked significantly at one another. After dinner, their mother said to Miss Mann:

"Will you come to my room please? I want to speak to you."

The girls were tremulous with excitement. Something was going to happen! By now, eavesdropping had become a matter of course. They no longer felt any shame; their one thought was to discover what was being hidden from them. They were at the door in a flash, directly Miss Mann had entered.

They listened, but all they could hear was a faint murmur of conversation. Were they to learn nothing after all? Then one of the voices was raised. Their mother said angrily:

"Did you suppose we were all blind—that we should never notice your condition? This throws a pretty light upon your conception of your duties as a governess. I shudder to think that I have confided my daughters' education to such hands. No doubt you have neglected them shamefully . . ."

The governess seemed to break in here with a protest, but she spoke softly, so that the girls could not hear.

"Talk, talk! Every wanton finds excuses. A woman such as you gives herself to the first comer without a

THE GOVERNESS

thought of the consequences. God will provide! It's monstrous that a hussy like you should become a governess. But I suppose you don't flatter yourself that I shall let you stay in the house any longer?"

The listeners shuddered. They could not fully understand, but their mother's tone seemed horrible to them. It was answered only by Miss Mann's sobs. The tears burst from their own eyes. Their mother grew angrier than ever.

"That's all you can do now, cry and snivel! Your tears won't move me. I have no sympathy with such a person as you are. It's no business of mine, what will happen to you. No doubt you know where to turn for help, and that's your affair. All I know is that you shan't stay another day in my house."

Miss Mann's despairing sobs were still the only answer. Never had they heard anyone cry in this fashion. Their feeling was that no one who cried so bitterly could possibly be in the wrong. Their mother waited in silence for a little while, and then said sharply:

"Well, that's all I have to say to you. Pack up your things this afternoon, and come to me for your salary to-morrow morning. You can go now."

The girls fled back to their own room. What could have happened? What was the meaning of this sudden storm? In a glass darkly, they began to have some suspicion of the truth. For the first time, their feeling was one of revolt against their parents.

"Wasn't it horrid of Mother to speak to her like that?" said the elder.

The younger was a little alarmed at such frank criticism, and stammered:

"But . . . but . . . we don't know what she's done."

"Nothing wrong, I'm certain. Miss Mann would never do anything wrong. Mother doesn't know her as well as we do."

"Wasn't it awful, the way she cried? It did make me feel so bad."

"Yes, it was dreadful. But the way Mother shouted at her was sickening, positively sickening!"

The speaker stamped angrily, and tears welled up into her eyes.

At this moment Miss Mann came in, looking utterly worn out.

"Girls, I have a lot to do this afternoon. I know you will be good, if I leave you to yourselves? We'll have the evening together."

She turned, and left the room, without noticing the children's forlorn looks.

"Did you see how red her eyes were? I simply can't understand how Mother could be so unkind to her."

"Poor Miss Mann!"

Again this lament, in a voice broken with tears. Then their Mother came to ask if they would like to go for a walk with her.

"Not to-day, Mother."

In fact, they were afraid of their mother, and they were angry because she did not tell them that she was sending Miss Mann away. It suited their mood better to be by themselves. They fluttered about the room like caged swallows, crushed by the atmosphere of falsehood and silence. They wondered if they could not go to Miss Mann and ask her what was the matter; tell her they wanted her to stay, that they thought Mother had been horribly unfair. But they were afraid of distressing her. Besides they were ashamed, for how could they say a word about the matter when all they knew had been learned by eavesdropping? They had to spend the interminable afternoon by themselves, moping, crying from time to time, and turning over in their minds memories of what they had heard through the closed door—their

THE GOVERNESS

mother's heartless anger and Miss Mann's despairing sobs.

In the evening, the governess came to see them, but only to say good night. As she left the room, the girls longed to break the silence, but could not utter a word. At the door, as if recalled by their dumb yearning, Miss Mann turned back, her eyes shining with emotion. She embraced both the girls, who instantly burst out crying. Kissing them once more, the governess hurried away.

It was obvious to the children that this was a final leavetaking.

"We shall never see her again," sobbed one.

"I know. She'll be gone when we come back from school to-morrow."

"Perhaps we shall be able to visit her after a time. Then she'll show us the baby."

"Yes, she's always such a dear."

"Poor Miss Mann!"

The sorrowful phrase seemed to hold a foreboding of their own destiny.

"I can't think how we shall get on without her!"

"I shall never be able to stand another governess, after her."

"Nor shall I."

"There'll never be anyone like Miss Mann. Besides . . ."

She did not venture to finish her sentence. An unconscious womanliness had made them feel a sort of veneration for Miss Mann, ever since they had known she had a baby. This was continually in their thoughts, and moved them profoundly.

"I say," said one.

"Yes?"

"I've got an idea. Can't we do something really nice for Miss Mann before she goes away, something that will show her how fond we are of her, and that we are not like Mother? Will you join in?"

“Rather!”

“You know how much she likes white roses. Let’s go out early to-morrow and buy some, before we go to school. We’ll put them in her room.”

“But when?”

“After school.”

“That’s no use, she’ll be gone then. Look here, I’ll steal out quite early, before breakfast, and bring them back here. Then we’ll take them to her.”

“All right, we must get up early.”

They raided their money-boxes. It made them almost cheerful, once more, that they would be able to show Miss Mann how much they loved her.

Early in the morning, roses in hand, they knocked at Miss Mann’s door. There was no answer. Thinking the governess must be asleep, they peeped in. The room was empty; the bed had not been slept in. On the table lay two letters. The girls were startled. What had happened?

“I shall go straight to Mother,” said the elder girl.

Defiantly, without a trace of fear, she accosted her mother with the words:

“Where’s Miss Mann?”

“In her room, I suppose.”

“There’s no one in her room; she never went to bed. She must have gone away last night. Why didn’t you tell us anything about it?”

The mother hardly noticed the challenging tone. Turning pale, she sought her husband, who went into Miss Mann’s room.

He stayed there some time, while the girls eyed their mother with gloomy indignation, and she seemed unable to meet their gaze.

Now their father came back, with an open letter in his hand. He, too, was agitated. The parents retired into

their own room, and conversed in low tones. This time, the girls were afraid to try and overhear what was said. They had never seen their father look like that before.

When their mother came out, they saw she had been weeping. They wanted to question her, but she said sharply:

“Be off with you to school, you’ll be late.”

They had to go. For hours they sat in class without attending to a single word. Then they rushed home. There, a dreadful thought seemed to dominate everyone’s mind. Even the servants had a strange look. Their mother came to meet them, and began to speak in carefully rehearsed phrases:

“Children, you won’t see Miss Mann any more; she is . . .”

The sentence was left unfinished. So furious, so menacing, was the girls’ expression that their mother could not lie to them. She turned away, and sought refuge in her own room.

That afternoon, Otto put in an appearance. One of the two letters had been addressed to him, and he had been summoned. He too, was pale and uneasy. No one spoke to him. Everybody shunned him. Catching sight of the two girls sitting disconsolate in a corner of the room, he went up to them.

“Don’t you come near us!” both screamed, regarding him with horror.

He paced up and down for a while, and then vanished. No one spoke to the girls and they said nothing to one another. They wandered aimlessly from room to room, looking silently into one another’s tear-stained faces when their paths crossed. They knew everything now. They knew that they had been cheated; they knew how mean people could be. They did not love their parents any more, did not trust Father or Mother any longer. They were sure they would never trust anyone again.

KALEIDOSCOPE ONE

All the burden of life pressed heavily upon their fair young shoulders. Their careless, happy childhood lay behind them; unknown terrors awaited them. The full significance of what had happened was still beyond their grasp, but they were wrestling with its dire potentialities. They were drawn together in their isolation, but it was dumb communion, for they could not break the spell of silence. From their elders they were completely cut off. No one could approach them, for the portals of their souls had been closed—perhaps for years to come. They were at war with all around them. For, in one brief day, they had grown up!

Not till late in the evening, when they were alone in their bedroom, did there reawaken in them the child's awe of solitude, the haunting fear of the dead woman, the terror of dread possibilities. It was bitterly cold; in the general confusion the heating apparatus had been forgotten. They both crept into one bed, and cuddled closely together, for mutual encouragement as well as for warmth. They were still unable to discuss their trouble. But now, at length, the younger's pent-up emotion found relief in a storm of tears, and the elder too, sobbed convulsively. Thus they lay weeping in one another's arms. They were no longer bewailing the loss of Miss Mann, or their estrangement from their parents. They were shaken by the anticipation of what might befall them in this unknown world into whose realities they had to-day looked for the first time. They shrank from the life into which they were growing up; from the life which seemed to them like a forest full of threatening shapes, a forest they had to cross. But by degrees this sense of anxiety grew visionary; their sobs were less violent, and came at longer intervals. They breathed quietly, now, in a rhythmical ^{SYNTHETIC} unison of peace. They slept.

HALLAM EDITION

The use of the term HALLAM EDITION for the collected works of Stefan Zweig stems from the author's residence in Hallam Place, London, before leaving England for Brazil where he died in 1942.